

**No
Game**

**No
Life**

**PRACTICAL
WAR GAME**



YUU KAMIYA



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Game**



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"Elder... Please
put some
clothes on."

"Nooow—let the
game begiin. ♥"





Someone had kicked down
their door with a mighty shriek.

—It was, well...a **pervert**.

No, not a **perversion**.

A real-live pervert...



"I'll attack twice if my first
Heavenly Smite isn't enough.
And if you're still standing...

I'll attack thrice——
with an
Absolute Smite——"

She didn't care whether she
lived or died so long as
she vanquished a **dragon**.

Victory will be
mine——!!



THE TEN COVENANTS

The absolute law of this world, created by the god Tet upon winning the throne of the One True God. Covenants that have forbidden all war among the intelligent Ixseeds—namely.



1. In this world, all bodily injury, war, and plunder is forbidden.



2. All conflicts shall be settled by victory and defeat in games.



3. Games shall be played for wagers that each agrees are of equal value.



4. Insofar as it does not conflict with “3,” any game or wager is permitted.



5. The party challenged shall have the right to determine the game.



6. Wagers sworn by the Covenants are absolutely binding.



7. For conflicts between groups, an agent plenipotentiary shall be established.



8. If cheating is discovered in a game, it shall be counted as a loss.



9. The above shall be absolute and immutable rules, in the name of the God.

10. Let's all have fun together.



Abstract War Game



Practical War Game



Threefold Levitation



One Pair or Heart Straight Flush



High Card All Raise (Part 1)



High Card All Raise (Part 2)

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NEW YORK

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YUU KAMIYA

Translation by Richard Tobin
Cover art by Yuu Kamiya

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ABSTRACT WAR GAME

A group of figures could be made out in the silent chambers of the Elkia Royal Castle's Great Hall. The tension was palpable. Two players were seated at a table, staring wordlessly at the chessboard in front of them as a group of spectators watched nervously from the sidelines. After taking a while to plan his next move, a young man with dark eyes and black hair finally broke the silence.

"...Okay, no way my mind is playing tricks on me. So yeah... Uh —?"

His face froze into a smirk befitting his personality, one that was almost avant-garde levels of twisted.

"Mind telling me when this piece got there?! When did you move this?!"

His yelling echoed through the castle halls—Sora, virgin, eighteen years old.

"Why, whatever are you saying? You couldn't poossibly think I'd ever get away with such an obvious way to cheat. 🎵"

The pointy-eared Elven girl who replied had wavy, golden-blond hair and clover-shaped pupils. She shrugged off Sora's claim with the sunniest of smiles—her name was Fiel Nirvalen.

"You know what I'm talking about! When did my rook get there?! ...Agggghhh, I'm putting that back where it was!"

"You can't just move the pieces any which way you want. Looks like you've lost thiiis one—"

"I know you moved it with your magic!! If you're gonna act like you didn't, at least try to *sound* convincing!!"

Fiel was definitely cheating. Any form of cheating would automatically make her the loser. Sora glanced over at one of the spectators—Jibril—who answered his look with a regretful shake of her head. She couldn't tell when or how the piece was moved—therefore, it was impossible to prove Fiel had broken the rules.

Besides, there was no point in pushing the issue any further; Sora's rook had been moved to a spot that put *Sora* at an advantage!! Fiel had secretly moved one of his pieces in order to make *him* look

like a cheater. He looked at her smug face and said:

“Also, couldja cut the invisible crap with Shiro before I’m forced to hang myself?! Have mercy on my neck here!! C’mon—if you value my life at all, you’ll hurry up and cancel your spell, kthx!!”

“Fi, don’t cancel that spell!! If we play our cards right, Sora just might off himself for us!”

Sora was doing his best to hold it together but was basically ready to take himself out at any moment. One spectator wasn’t going to let this opportunity pass her by—Chlammy, who with utmost enthusiasm ordered Fiel to keep up her spell.

“Oh? Do you have any proof that I turned Shiro inviiisible?”

Sora thrust his smartphone at Fiel, who was playing dumb as per Chlammy’s request.

“I can still see her in my camera! To my right! She’s way whiter than usual, see?! I dunno what you did to her, but hurry up and turn the spell off, you damn monster!!”

“Hmm? So you have proof that picture is real, too? ♥”

Y-you...you bitch—!!

“Same goes for that damn sun!! Get rid of that shit!!”

Sora lost his cool, both physically and mentally. The giant, bright ball floating above him played a large role in that. He was being pelted with rays of hot sunlight, as if he were at the beach in the middle of summer instead of inside a castle.

“Just how many spells do you plan on using?! I’m only a human! Take it easy, will ya?!”

“Why, I have to use so many *because* you’re only an Immanity. To be honest, I wish I could use a lot mooore,” Fiel replied with a pleasant smile, but she was deadly serious—her eyes were as cold as ice.

Why are we doing this again? Sora searched his hazy thoughts for the reason why a simple chess scrimmage had turned into a borderline death match...



“Hey, Fiel. You up for some chess?”

Sora had been the one to challenge Fiel. Depending on the game, he could hold his own against a mage—hell, even a god. Theoretically, it was impossible to cheat at a finite, zero-sum, two-player game with perfect information. The Ten Covenants forbade injury of any kind, including tampering with thoughts and memories. Tampering with the board was similarly impossible, so long as both players paid attention.

One could potentially skirt the rules by claiming their opponent was misremembering things, but a third-party observer would prevent that from happening. Simple enough, right? This was precisely why...

...Sora wanted to test this out himself.

So he challenged the most adept magic-user he knew to a match.

"Why meee, though? Whyyy would I play a game with you?"

Fiel had flatly refused his challenge with a smile. After all, she had no reason to show him any of the tricks up her sleeve. Sora had anticipated her answer, so he made an offer—using Chlammy's memories as bargaining chips.

"In return, I'll tell you one of Chlammy's suuuper-embarrassing memories. One you don't know about."

He was wagering a deep, dark secret held by Chlammy—without Chlammy's permission, of course.

"...Um, stop right there. Where do you get off using my memories as a prize for playing—?"

"Why, I know what Chlammy does at night when she's *all by herself*—are you offering somethiiiing else?"

"Hey—what?! What are you talking about, Fi?!" Chlammy cried out in embarrassment, but it went unheard between Sora and Fiel, who had already started their dealmaking. Both players had slight grins on their faces as they tried to suss each other out.

"But you don't know *what* she's thinking about when she does it... right?"

"You have yourself a deeeal. ♥ Nooow—let's get started."

With a brief but firm handshake, they shared an intense gaze—and agreed to the terms of the match.

Shiro, who had watched the entire exchange from beside Sora, quietly interjected:

"...So, what will...Brother get...if he wins...?"

Oh, right...

She'd figured out that her brother had yet to even think about such details and continued:

"I vote for...thirty minutes of...FiChlam *yuri* stuff... Just keep it, PG-13..."

"Shiro...I'm gonna stop you right there—ChlamFi is a *way* better ship name!"

"...Ohhh... So you're forcing me to piiick between a secret and *yuri*?!" Fiel agonized as the siblings became engaged in a heated debate.

“You’re not actually considering this, are you, Fi?! I lose no matter what the outcome is! Don’t I get a say in this?!” Chlammy cried out in vain; Fiel was already in the palm of the siblings’ hands.

With a wager like this, Fiel only stood to win. For Chlammy, on the other hand, the opposite was true. It was the beginning of just another game...



Once the game was finished, Jibril captured the loser’s end of the deal on camera using Sora and Shiro’s smartphone and tablet. Meanwhile, the siblings thought: *I’ll never be able to look at a pair of scissors the same way again...*

“Fi! You better not have lost on purpose! Hey, stop—”

“Who, me? I did the best I could, hooonest... Why, I’m feeling really down about it... Maaaybe I’ll feel better if you use the Covenants to figure out where you should touch me right nooow. ♥”

“Sto... I—I can’t say that out loud— Hngh!”

Whether the Covenants had anything to do with this was another matter entirely. The fruits of Sora’s victory were sweet indeed, but rather than basking in it...

“Jibril... Multi-casting is something only Elves can do, right?”

“Yes. Well, if you exclude a few exceptions and fakes, then that should indeed be true.”

“And Fiel’s a hexcaster... Hang on—can anyone cast more than six at a time?”

...Sora was exhausted—cautious, even—as he asked Jibril the question. He thought of the sheer amount of magic he had just gone up against for a simple chess match. Even thirty blissful minutes of FiChlam action didn’t need that much magic.

“As far as I know, there have been two others in the past—two *octa-casters*.”

Jibril’s answer sent beads of cold sweat down Sora’s—and even Shiro’s—spine. A mage capable of casting *two more* simultaneous spells than Fiel? Jibril began sharing what she knew about these octa-casters, as if prodded by the looks of astonishment coming from the two siblings.

“Let’s start with Nina Clive.”

Nina was a god-tier genius who unified the three Elven forces at the end of the Great War; an unprecedented master strategist and tactician as well as a manipulator of magic who compiled the rites of

spirit-breaking, a feat that earned the Elf the highest mage title of all time—Grand Magus.

“...Rites of spirit-breaking?”

“Yes, a total of five spells which include Kú Li Anse and Áka Si Anse.”

Aha. Sora had seen these before, during his *Materialization Shiritori* match with Jibril and the Great War RTS, respectively. The first spell was capable of protecting against a hydrogen bomb while the second could pretty much wipe a city off the face of a planet—he remembered both incidents vividly. But something was strange... Why did Jibril know all this stuff? Both siblings immediately began to speculate while Jibril continued her explanation.

“The other was Think Nirvalen.”

Until Nina’s heyday, Think was considered the most adept caster in all of Elven history and an unprecedented genius. Like Nina, she was also a Grand Magus. Think was responsible for the system that served as the basis of all Elven rite compiling—something multi-casters still used to this day. A gifted tactician, she formed the first Elven mage battalion capable of casting large-scale magic in tandem—

“Hmm? Wait a second... Did you say *Nirvalen*...?” Sora interrupted. He, Shiro, and Jibril let their gazes fall to their screens.

“That’s righhht! No point in hiding it! Why, she’s the distant relative of your veery own Fiel Nirvalen! *Nom.* ♥”

“Hyaaaagh?! That’s my ear! Get that out of your mou—byaaaah!!”

As they recorded this girl-on-girl, Elf-on-Immanity romp, Sora and Shiro couldn’t help thinking, eyes aglint:

...Bet Fiel’s ancestor is rolling in her grave.

“...So, uh...mind if I ask what Think was like?” Sora inquired, quickly ridding his eyes of any remaining glint before twiddling a chess piece in his fingers. Fiel’s mouth, with Chlammy’s ear still in it, began to form a dangerous smile. She looked straight at Jibril and answered with a strange sense of pride:

“Why, there aren’t many details left about her... After alllll—”

“Yes—evidently, she lived in the Elven capital that I destroyed with my Heavenly Smite before I *borrowed* all their books. ♪”

Figures. That explains why Jibril knew so much about the two mages. It’s always her fault, the siblings thought with a sigh.

“I suspect the two mages were the same person.”

A perp doing the detective work? First time for everything, I guess, an exasperated Sora thought as he listened to the culprit’s (that is,

Jibril's) deduction.

"First—both of them were born toward the end of the War, approximately three hundred years ago."

"...Huh. So the only two known octa-casters ever were both *conveniently* from the same generation."

"Furthermore, any mention of Think Nirvalen seems to disappear from my library the moment Nina Clive steps into the picture."

"....."

"And yet, after the War ends, Nina Clive is mentioned one last time when founding Elven Gard before disappearing without a trace, let alone any descendants. Meanwhile, the supposedly defunct Nirvalen lineage continued with the pathetic specimen we see here."

Jibril pointed at Fiel, who was still having her way with Chlammy even though the thirty minutes dictated by the Covenants had ended. QED.

"I believe Nina Clive might be an alias created by Think Nirvalen," Jibril deduced with a brief bow.

"Ya don't say..." Sora twiddled the chess piece in his fingers even faster, then smiled as if he'd figured something out.

"...Brother?"

Shiro had yet to figure it out herself. Sora definitely wanted to let her in on his fun little discovery. He looked at the pawn in his hand, then out the window at the giant chess piece that loomed over the landscape.

"Cool if I ask one more question?"

He asked a question *he already knew the answer to*:

"It's about chess—*how long has it existed in Disboard?*"

Shiro grinned in realization—" " was now on the same page.

"The game's origins are unknown, but the rules were standardized after the establishment of the Ten Covenants... Master?"

Jibril looked somewhat confused when she noticed the siblings' devilish grins. A thought occurred to them:

It's so obvious. Chess definitely existed during the Great War.

That was why Tet created the giant chess pieces around Disboard and established the Race Pieces and their rules. He was the one who ended the Great War—which undoubtedly happened—by treating it like a game. Sora and Shiro smirked as they wondered—was Tet the only one who thought of war that way...?

Chess is an abstract game—a war played out on a game board.

And Sora had just beaten Fiel, whose ancestor was an even more

accomplished more than herself. Given that chess existed during the Great War:

“I bet there were *others*, too... Others who tried to end the War by treating it like a game.”

Or, in other words—

—a practical war game.



PRACTICAL WAR GAME

On that day, Think Nirvalen lay on the hot sand—so hot, it was turning into glass—staring aimlessly at the sky.

...Even with her long ears, all she could hear was silence. The gem embedded in her forehead looked more like charcoal; her empty eyes with their diamond-shaped pupils flickered with the light from the heavens. That crimson light burned up into the detritus that filled the air: the iridescent blue vestiges of dying spirits. With every blink, Think counted another streak of light falling through the sky, another vessel tumbling from the fleet of Elven airships. As she faded in and out of consciousness, as if waking up from a dream, she thought:

I wonder what the real color of the sky used to be. I wonder what the world was like before the Great War...

It was the first time she ever asked herself these questions...

The war cries of soldiers, the dying throes of those cut down, the triumphant cheering of the victorious, and the tragic wails of the fallen. It truly was a symphony. It was all that the world and its wars amounted to for the young genius, who had chalked up masterpiece after masterpiece on the battlefield. None of it mattered to her; she knew it was all pointless. She simply did her duty the same way one tidies their room—aimlessly, without rhyme or reason.

The little girl eventually grew into a woman, and the world was more malleable to her will than ever before. The time had come for her to pay tribute to Kainas, the god of the forest, creator of the Elves. She got down on one knee and bowed her head like she was supposed to do—but as always, none of it meant anything to her.

“I commend thee for thy wisdom, thy contributions to Elfkind, and for thy loyalty to me. The advent of a flower such as thyself is surely an auspicious sign that the Great War is coming to an end; that the Elves shall prevail triumphant over the other foolish races and their false gods; that I shall take my rightful place on the throne of the One True God.”

An end to the Great War? The One True God? Of what, exactly?

She was at her wits' end. When did the War even start? This simpleton who thinks they're a god doesn't even know that. A war that never ends is a part of homeostasis. The same way rivers cut away from the earth, the sea crashes into the land, the land parts the sea, and earth buries its rivers. Planets are in a state of constant change. What difference does it make if it is nature or gods and Elves who are doing the changing?

Kainas wants to be the One True God? Sure—let them have it. And if they can't have that specific throne, then a porcelain one will do just fine...

Before long, Think received the title of Grand Magus—an archmage, the epitome of mages. She continued to manipulate the world around her the way she had since she was a child, without any shred of doubt.

Nothing in existence could stop her.

The world was her playground. She had thought that, at least until today—this day, this moment.

action. The only thing she could move was her diamond eyes. Think Nirvalen looked up and saw a dark figure that covered her with its shadow. It was a man who shouldered a mass of steel many times his own size. He gazed down at her.

“~~~~~”

Think couldn't understand what he was saying—she didn't even know what language it was. But now that she was fully conscious, she managed to recall what had just happened.

...And like always, she stuck to the simplest of terms.

It was a long process, really. The process of leading the Elven army to eliminate the Dwarf race.

She had been *stopped*.

Think had encountered the Dwarves—it was the first time she had ever seen their steel armada flying through the sky. She came under fire...

...and was defeated.

...*De...feat...?*

She wasn't familiar with the term...the concept...the notion of *defeat*. It hit her slowly, like a droplet of water seeping through the crevasses of her brain.

Defeat—? Who lost? How? Why?

Think was bewildered. This had never felt like fighting to her. She crawled her way out of the fallen airship and saw him. It was about to happen. This man was about to do it. He was going to stab her with that mass of steel, and then...

...And...then...?

Her mind refused to grasp the situation, as did her eyes. The massive steel object the man was now holding above his head—she could tell it was a sword. This was the sword that would do it. This shining sword was going to cut down her many spells, and...then...

When this sword lands, my life will be forfeit.

Think played out the scenario in her mind, which felt completely separate from reality, while she remained motionless on her hands and knees and watched the steel mass in a daze. The blade gleamed as it fell toward her, when suddenly—

“~~~~~?!”

—the moment the man tried to swing it down, it cracked down the middle, and the lower half snapped clean off. The man looked at his blade in astonishment...before bursting into laughter and looking up into the sky.

...She began walking. Think looked up at the heavens and laughed to herself. Death rained down on her from the bleeding sky. There were moments when the terrible sight looked almost beautiful to her. Her once-colorless world was turning to Technicolor, and she realized something: This recurring feeling she had experienced after her first defeat ever wasn't pain or anguish.

She painted a vision of the future. The world she thought was cruel and irredeemable now seemed more beautiful than any masterpiece she had ever laid eyes on. She laughed at how moved she was by the realization. Every pointless, meaningless thing she had done up until now suddenly began to make sense—by thinking of what the world could be. Yes—!

A world where she ends the Great War—a world without war. All she had to do was wipe those damned Dwarves off the face of the planet. She now had a reason to fight: to eliminate any and every threat that existed.

She'd claim the world as her own and finally see what color the sky really was. She took a deep breath—and let out a sigh...

“...Why, you can't leave me like this, begging for mooore. ♥”

That was the day Think Nirvalen was born.

...Maybe not *born*... More like—the day she *snapped*.

She didn't know that, though. Anger was something she never thought she'd have to deal with.

Her ominous laughter heralded the monster that had just been born, a genius out for blood...



victory.”

She had received a title thought to be long lost to history.

“...I did nothing. My thanks to you, Admiral, and the Aseä Alanion, for your help.”

Without an inkling of boasting over her military feats, she simply sent out a warm gaze upon the city she protected. She was sincere when she thanked the commander in her soft, high-pitched voice, reminiscent of a small bell. He could hear her earnestness in her words.

“My, my— Never in a million years did I think we would be able to exterminate those *moles* and their filthy armada without suffering a single casualty...”

They had managed to destroy the Dwarf armada virtually unscathed. It’s worth mentioning, though—it wasn’t the *Elves* who had destroyed them.

This was the source of the admiral’s awe—no, more like *fear*—he held for Nina. The Dwarves’ high-speed fleet of steel ships had fallen from the sky like leaves off a dead tree, which begged the question:

“...How did you know...when the In-Sein Nebia would appear?”

He asked about the Phantasma that had suddenly *appeared* from behind the Dwarf armada. “Appear” was the most appropriate way to describe what was normally indistinguishable from fog.

The In-Sein Nebia, also known as the fog of death, was among the worst of all the known Phantasmas—a calamity in its truest form. This fog could change size and shape at will—from a dense fog large enough to engulf a desert to a single dew drop.

It consumed anything and everything in its path—organic or inorganic—and decayed it into oblivion. Destroying the Phantasma’s core was the only way to stop its creeping wall of death, a feat nigh impossible given how difficult it was to actually find the core, which could be any drop of liquid in the entire fog cloud. The only feasible way to escape its clutches was to freeze or evaporate large parts of it all at once.

This living absurdity had appeared right behind the Dwarven fleet, which was moving at high speeds in an effort to force their way through the Elf defenses. The Elves had employed a deep defense, assuming a semicircle formation in order to try and sandwich—and potentially surround—the Dwarves.

The Elven soldiers lay in wait, unable to scold their comrades for cowering in fear.

The plan had fallen through. It was a nightmare scenario, especially given how the Dwarves were hightailing it out of there. Truth be told, the admiral almost gave the order to retreat—it was this close to rolling off the tip of his tongue. He looked to his side and saw Nina Clive stifling a cackle as she gave her orders:

“...*Hold your positions.*”

Everyone—even the admiral—was in disbelief as they watched the Dwarves charge straight toward them.

And it was no wonder. The Dwarves had the Elves at their front

and to their sides, and the fog of death at their rear. Their only options were to either charge the Elves as planned or disintegrate inside the fog.

The Elves were ready for the attack, however. They moved the formidable Aseä Alanion into position to intercept the Dwarven blitzkrieg. Even the swift Dwarf armada wouldn't be able to penetrate their bulwark easily. If they were to engage in combat and the In-Sein Nebia were to catch up to them, both armies would perish.

.....,

The Grand Magus Nina Clive, unparalleled Elf genius, wore a thin smile as the Elven forces followed her insane commands. Amidst the tension, fear, and sheer intensity of the enemy fleet and Phantasma piling toward them, there was only silence on the deck of the Elven battleship. Suddenly—

—the Dwarves broke their formation and spread out. They ignored the Elves in order to fight the In-Sein Nebia as they tried making their escape. The entire Elf fleet, including the admiral—save for Nina—stared in utter awe, unable to process what was happening. It was just as Nina had predicted. Instead of facing certain death together with the Elves, the Dwarves decided to use their mobility to flee the In-Sein Nebia with their lives. It didn't make sense—how did she know this would happen?

The majority of the Dwarves fell victim to the Phantasma. It was the moment she had been waiting for.

“All Capture Vessels—deploy probing rites and seize the enemy Phantasma’s core.”

The admiral listened to the chilling tone with which she gave her orders. It was as if Nina had this all planned.

...The Grand Magus said no more. The admiral continued his questioning in a weary voice:

“You knew it would appear— You needed the In-Sein Nebia for your plan... Your plan was never about the Dwarves... The real reason you called the Aseä Alanion into battle was—”

“Grand Magus, a report for you.”

Someone behind them interrupted the admiral mid-sentence. He turned around to see a woman dressed in full black, with a black veil covering her face. “The sealing rite has proven effective against the core. We are currently transporting it.”

This woman was not a subordinate of the admiral's. He had never seen her before. She had accompanied the Grand Magus onto the ship. The admiral didn't know who she was, but the report she gave the Grand Magus had answered his question.

—Why did she need so many troops?

Without the two battalions flanking from either side, the Dwarves would have easily been able to escape the Phantasma.

Why didn't she have troops come in from behind to surround the Dwarves?

She needed the Dwarves to engage in combat with the Phantasma in order to buy her time to locate its core. In other words—

—*capturing the Phantasma had been her plan all along.*

The twenty undocumented Capture Vessels accompanying their air force were all the proof the admiral needed. Nina Clive knew the Phantasma was going to appear, and she intended on using it.

“...Next time, if at all possible, I would appreciate learning our combat strategy in full...”

...He undoubtedly recognized Nina Clive's capabilities. But as admiral of the Aseä Alanion, he was trusted with the lives of his soldiers. He recognized that Nina could use the Aseä Alanion more effectively than he could—that there would be fewer casualties under her than him. He only wished she'd trust him a little bit more.

The admiral mustered an awkward laugh. He knew more than anyone that his request was unbecoming of a man his age.

“...Yes, I'll do that if at all possible,” came Nina Clive's reply.

“With all due respect, Admiral. You aren't of a high enough rank for such information to concern you. Please know your place.”

The Grand Magus gave a slight sigh when the woman in the black veil added her own biting remark. Unlike the humble Grand Magus, this woman didn't try to hide the fact that she was an elite and the admiral was a lowly civil servant. She ignored the admiral's indignant snort and handed a document to the Grand Magus.

“Please give me the word to sign the core over to the care of the Akasha Hollowfication Project.”

Akasha... The admiral had heard the word before. It was an experiment being conducted in the Elven capital of Melryln. The experiment was supposedly taking place under the creator of the Elves—Kainas's—sanctuary, but the rumors stopped there. Any further information about the Hollowfication Project was above an admiral's rank...

The Grand Magus signed the document with her petite, dainty hands. She gave it back to the woman, who let out a small, but audible, sigh of relief. The admiral quietly let slip another awkward chuckle.

“...Something you want to say?”

“Oh no—I was just thinking about how young the two of you are.”

He found it interesting that this woman—who took pride in being

an elite and was of a rank high enough to be involved with the Akasha Hollowfication Project—also held the genius Magus in revere. She was no different than he was when it came to understanding—well, not understanding—whatever had transpired that day. Her evident *relief* made her remark earlier somewhat entertaining.

...It wasn't long ago when going up against a Phantasma was considered suicide. Especially against the In-Sein Nebia—that was downright laughable.

Not anymore, though...

The admiral and the veiled woman shared the same thought as they gazed at the Grand Magus from behind.

The young Magus stood atop the stern of the ship, trying to fix the clothes that were obviously too big for her. The tiny gestures she made with her hands as she straightened out her gown were cute, though unbecoming, all things considered. It only added to how terrifying her boundless genius was.

Nina Clive was an Elf of few words. She listened, learned, imagined, thought, and understood—therefore she never needed to counsel in anyone. She let others know what to do, answered their questions, and did what needed doing. They needed only to follow her commands, and everything would work out.

The admiral knew that nobody could possibly understand the world as she saw it through her own eyes—as she stood proudly above all else, watching the world unravel itself before her.

He didn't need to say this out loud; the veiled woman undoubtedly agreed with him, albeit begrudgingly.

All he could do was thank the gods that Nina was on his side, give a bow, and then take his leave.

Nina stood there alone against the wind. No one could fathom what went on in her mind as she gazed down upon her homeland from the ship's stern. No one would ever realize what the strained grin on her face or her teary eyes meant. They couldn't possibly know her thoughts were as simple as:

I want to go home as soon as possible.



And go home she did. It was the first time Nina Clive had returned home in ten days. She locked the door after closing it, then used her multi-casting to double-check that she was alone. After scanning her mansion to make sure no one was listening in on her, she let out a deep sigh.

“Ugggh... I don’t think I can take this anymore!!”

That was the first thing to escape her mouth. She threw off her gown, which was weighed down by her many badges and medals. Not a single soul in Elven Gard knew how she felt deep down. With a loud wail, she called out to the *other person* in her home:

“Elderrr! You didn’t say anything about the In-Sein Nebia showing up! I really thought I was going to die this time!! All I could do was smile and accept my inevitable doom! Are you even listening?!”

Several thoughts passed through Nina’s mind as she stomped around her house, looking for her elder.

“You are far too humble”?

Humble?! I’m not being humble! It’s the truth: I really didn’t do a single thing!

“How did you know when the In-Sein Nebia would appear?”

I know, right?! Pretty crazy, right?! I’d like to know the answer to that myself!!



“Next time, if at all possible, I would appreciate learning our combat strategy in full.”

That sounds fair. I'll be sure to let'cha know when I can! Just one problem, Admiral: I never have any idea what's coming, either!!

She ran around the ridiculously large manor, screaming and bawling her eyes out.

“Let me know what I'm doing, too, will ya?! And what—*Capture Vessels*?! Those're new! Wouldn't it be nice if the *Grand Magus* had a wee bit more information than whatever's on the flash cards you always give me? I mean—the reality is that no one got hurt, and your plans were perfect as usual...”

The *only* thing Nina did for this battle was hand an encrypted message—prepared by her elder—to the Akasha Project Headquarters. No more, no less.

After that, she just stood next to the admiral and tried to look like everything was going according to plan while she followed the script prepared by her elder. The plan relied on her having complete trust in her elder's orders—had she done anything differently, the entire ordeal could've ended *very poorly*. It was a testament to how much Nina's elder trusted her to follow orders, but... But still—!

“Elder!! Tell me—whyyy does some rando working at the Akasha HQ know more about the plan than I do? Ugggh!! Where are you anyway? You'd better answer me! Eld—”

Nina finally found who she was looking for but was shocked by what she saw.

...Her elder was at the dining table—or, to be more precise, she was *on* the dining table—sleeping with her rear end in the air. There was nothing covering her exposed butt—er, her exposed everything!

Nina Clive lived together with her elder. And there she was, in all her glory! Her *secret* elder, the sole reason she had to live in this absurd manor with no servants, no help, no nothing!

“Argh, Elder! There are lines you shouldn't cross as a dignified Elf!!”

Nina passed out for a moment, but quickly recovered before shouting herself hoarse. She darted out of the living room as quickly as she could before spinning around and yelling:

“*Huff...huff...* Wh-what did you do this time? What did you do to end up like that?!”

Nina went back to the entrance, where she'd discarded her gown earlier. Gasping for air, she picked up the gown and ran back to her elder, flung the gown over her elder's naked body, and promptly

collapsed on the spot.

Such shenanigans were relatively commonplace in the Clive residence.

Like the time her elder got so absorbed in her research that she forgot to eat or sleep and almost starved to death after leaving a request for “adequate nutrition to fuel my latest incredible discovery.” Or that time when she got lost in thought while taking a hot bath, only to pass out from overheating and almost drown. Then there was when she nearly died due to exhausting her own magic for science—to the extent that her forehead gem turned pitch-black.

Nina recalled many such dumb incidents. But this time, she'd prepared for the inevitable.

“I left you food and clothes and even a first aid kit! What could have gone wro—**KYAAAAAAH?!**”

Nina's harried question crescendoed into a scream as a set of tentacles suddenly wrapped themselves around her.

“...Niiinaaa? Why, you ought to know better than to wake me when I'm getting my beauty sleeep... You've sure got soome nerve...”

Her elder squirmed atop the table, pushing off the garment Nina had thrown over her naked body.

“I'll have to punish you by taaaking your virginity with these weird tentacles that ooze soome kind of aphrodisiac. ♪”

“**Please don't!!** And what do you mean by ‘weird’?! Don't tell me you don't even know where these came from?! I definitely don't want my first time to be with some unknown set of tentacles! Also, why are you summoning things that you don't understand all willy-nilly in the first place?!” Nina cried and pleaded for her to stop. Her elder's tone was friendly, but the smile on her face was absolutely sinister.

Inter-world summoning was an incredibly high-level type of magic. Certainly not something used to chastise your roommate on a whim—especially when the caster is still half-asleep. Nina's elder—currently considered a missing person—was much more frightening than anything you'd find in this world or others. She was a true genius—the true genius—and the only one who knew more about Nina Clive than Nina herself. This individual was none other than Think Nirvalen.

“Don't fall back asleep and leave me alone with this... *Mghfgh?!?*”

Nina called out for Think, but she had fallen back asleep as if

nothing happened. What's worse was the moment Nina opened her mouth to speak, one of the obscene appendages jammed itself down her throat.

...Oh... I'm starting to feel dizzy...

A vile stench hit the inside of her nasal cavities from the back of her throat, and she began to phase out of consciousness. There was nothing Nina Clive, a penta-caster, could do to stop the creature.

"...? Why, just give in and enjoyyy it while it has its way with youuu... What's stopping you, your pride as a laaady?" Think muttered in her sleepy, dreamlike state of mind. Nina, who was now bound and gagged by the tentacles, glared at Think while she did her best to maintain any semblance of sanity.

"*Sigh...* Niiina? Learning is a part of being a genius—and I've come to learn I pass out withoooo food or sleep. I can't survive off research alooone. I figured that out because I am a geeenius. 🎵"

...Is that the sort of thing you need to "figure out"?

In order to keep herself from succumbing to the aphrodisiac ooze, Nina focused as hard as she could on listening to the genius's profound findings.

"So, I had this ingenious idea—no, wait. Seeing as I *am* a genius, I guess it was just a regular idea for me... I had this *regular* idea—an idea no nooormal person could come up with even if they spent their whole life thinking about it!" Think boasted, smiling.



She wiggled her voluptuous bottom proudly. The last vestiges of Nina's sanity gave out at the sight—

“Hngh

This is what real beauty looks like. According to Think, she was the perfect specimen of a woman. From Think's perspective, attempting to enhance her already-perfect appearance with clothes and such was flat-out superficial and superfluous. Nina looked at Think's naked body—this self-proclaimed real beauty—but something was off... What was this feeling she had? She almost agreed with Think for a moment, but then she realized...

Oh...the aphrodisiac must be messing with my head! That must be it!

"E-Elder...I'll be honest, when you say all this without clothes on...you look like some kind of voyeur fetishist—"

Just then, Think started casting a spell.

"A fetishist...? How very cheeky of you, Niiina. ♥"

"Ngyaaah! My apologies! Your revolutionary thought process is far too advanced for a lowly peon such as I!! The same goes for your luscious body! It's far too beautiful for us commoners to lay eyes on! That's the only reason I thought it'd be better for you to wear clothes! A-also...!"

Nina had no way of predicting what kind of spell this octa-caster was about to produce. All she could do was get on the floor and grovel.

And yet—and yet...!!

"W-would I be wrong to guess you haven't been taking care of your hygiene these past few days...?!"

When was the last time Think had taken a bath?

She asked the question as indifferently as she could. Think froze in place, pondering for a moment as her infallible logic began to fall apart.

"..... ♥"

She smiled and silently held out her arms. Her logic was as solid as a rock. How, you ask? Well, Think was going to have *Nina* carry her to the bath, where she could get even more sleep. Think could barely function, to say nothing of her logic. Nina sighed.

This is how it always goes.

"...Okay, you win... Just make sure to get some work done when you wake up, all right...?"

Nina Clive was exhausted.

Why? Why did she have to almost die in battle, only to come home tired beyond belief? Why did she have to see her elder, whom she respected and adored, buck naked? Why did she have to carry her to the bathroom and wash her while she slept?

Why? Why did a regular person like her have to be revered as a Grand Magus? Why had she been forced to take the place of Think Nirvalen?

“...Ah...right...”

She asked herself these questions as she hauled a snoozing Think to the bath. She heard the Elf murmur “Niiina...welcome back...” and looked over her shoulder to see her elder with a smile on her face, as if she had just remembered to say something important.

“.....Yeah... I’m home, Elder,” Nina replied. She recalled the day her life changed...

What Nina saw wasn't something so tidily summed up as "genius." Think was something else. She saw the world in a completely different way—she was living in a world of her own. She wasn't just another person who would be tossed around in the whirlwind of chaos that was the Great War. Think was more special than that. She was one who would do the tossing, and yet—

—she was missing something.

...It wasn't as if Nina knew Think or anything. In fact, Think Nirvalen wasn't particularly close to anyone. Nina picked up on this and realized: Think Nirvalen never really looked at anyone. What came off as dignified was simple disinterest, and what seemed like grace was her knowing the true value of people—that to her, juniors and elders alike were equally worthless.

Think's faint smile, the same one she always had on no matter who she was speaking with, told it all. No one could understand her—nor did she so much as desire to be understood.

So...who is Think Nirvalen? Anyone who thought they knew the answer definitely didn't know the real Think Nirvalen. If they really knew her—she who was unknowable—they certainly wouldn't be able to tell you.

Which is why one day, Nina had fleeting thought...

Just once, she wanted Think to meet her gaze. Just once, she wanted to see a genuine smile on Think's face.

Perhaps...not even Think knew *herself* deep down.

Nina was aware that she would never know the answer, and yet she wondered...who the real Think Nirvalen was...and what Think was missing, even if Think herself didn't know what that was. Nina wanted to know those answers... This wasn't a passing thought—no, more like...she pondered it for a long time. She still did, even on the fateful day long ago...

had put so much of their hopes on Think. All over the country, the Elves were thrown into chaos. Nina, who was a student at the time, had been saddled with the pointless task of gathering information.

She was on her way home that night, tired as could be after working impossibly long hours, when—there she was—gnawing on a cracker on Nina’s bed. Her clothes were tattered, and there were wounds all over her body.

“Ah. I’ve been waiting for you. Niiina. Welcome back hooome! 🎵”

Think Nirvalen had so flippantly welcomed Nina into Nina’s own home without a care in the world. Nina Clive felt her heart stop for a moment.

from head to toe in wounds, and yet, “Are you all right?” was the only thing she had said so far—and with a fat grin across her face, at that.

“There’s nothing all right about this! Why are you in my house?!”

“Why, isn’t it obvious? I’m heere to see you.”

Think continued smiling as she approached Nina, who felt a chill run down her spine.

Think’s injuries were serious—like, within-inches-of-death serious. She was full of bruises, gashes, and scrapes, and clearly had at least three fractures, if not more. Her head was bleeding, too, which meant she’d likely suffered head trauma.

That smile, though. Now that’s freaky. She’s lost her damn mind.

It was nothing like her usual feminine, refined smile—this was an ominous, devilish grin. Nina almost instinctively knew: *Someone’s gonna die.*

Not just *someone*—not even a dozen or a hundred someones, either. Moreover: Why was this monster in Nina’s home in the first place?

Once all these thoughts finished running through her mind, Nina came to a realization:

Why does she know my name...?

To Think Nirvalen, Nina was nothing more than a stranger, one of the masses. She was one of the many who felt Think would never so much as spare her a glance; they’d shared a few words, and Nina remembered seeing Think smile at her once.

Nina was silently freaking out when Think, still smiling, casually handed her something. Nina took it without thinking and stared at it in bewilderment. In her hand was a stack of papers clipped together.

“I’m sure you already knooow, but it’s a very busy job...being the Grand Magus...”

“Y-yes... Th-that’s why everything is such a mess now that you’re gone—”

“That’s whyyy...you’ll do it! You’ll be the Grand Magus, starting today! ♥”

.....

.....Nina let out a deep breath. She’d finally figured out what was going on. She laughed quietly to herself.

“Elder, I’m going to take you to the hospital. Come, we’ll go together. 🎵”

There was something very, very wrong with Think Nirvalen—she

was supposed to be the ultimate genius and everyone's much-beloved elder! What on earth had happened to her to make her say something so bizarre?

The Grand Magus? Who? Me? Hmm...? Yeah...no. No, no, no. Not gonna happen. Not in a million years—I mean, I can't. It'd be impossible. And ridiculous. Not to mention, she barely knows me. Why does she know my name? Maybe she's just an illusion? I must be working too hard.

“I need to see a specialist to help me with these hallucinations I'm —”

Surprised at how calm she was with her accurate self-analysis, Nina reached out for the hallucination. The moment she touched it—

“

she had already forgotten about the pain in her rear from being spanked so much; she couldn't even process what was going on.

Think picked up the bundle of paper and thrust it back into Nina's arms, then proclaimed with utmost levity:

"Firrrest, go submit this thesis to the Garden. I need you to graduate ASAP. 🎵"

A new thesis written by *the* Think Nirvalen.

Nina gulped; she knew how valuable the disheveled stack of papers in her arms was. Next to the title was a date... *Yesterday's* date...

She didn't write this with all those injuries...did she?

Nina was shocked, incredulous. Still on the floor, she barely managed to ask through her labored breathing:

"...Win...? End the War...? How, though...?"

End the Great War? That was impossible. At least, as far as Nina could imagine.

What did Think mean by "win"? Like a game? How would that end the War?

You win today, then lose tomorrow; the next generation wins it back only for the following generation to take it away. It was a long back-and-forth. No, an eternal back-and forth. It was how the world worked.

Let's say Kainas had their way and eliminated all of the other Old Dei... It probably wouldn't be enough to bring an end to the Great War. If the Elves won, all the other races would seek to destroy them.

Theoretically, this cycle couldn't end—it was virtually impossible.

Think just stared back at Nina with the same grin on her face as she replied:

"It's simple, really... We just need to kill everything on the plaaanet. ♥"

She was basically saying: *No biggie, we'll just destroy the world.*

"That includes the Old Dei and allll the other races. Why, I think the world is due for a nice tidying up—we'll blow them off the face of the planet with magic. 🎵 In fact, we can get rid of every last living thing except youuu and me. Last Elf standing claims the worrrld. ♥"

Think relished in what she felt was yet another one of her ingenious ideas.

She might actually pull it off... Nina thought with a sigh. Not that she agreed with ending the world...but Think was clearly confident.

Nina could see it in her eyes; not even the gods had such confidence, the god of the Elves, Kainas, included. Think had a clear vision.

There was definitely something wrong with her; she must have hit her head too hard. Whatever had been keeping this madness at bay up until this point was long gone.

Okay, let me get this straight. She intends to outdo even the gods and destroy the world—an entire planet. This is Think Nirvalen we're talking about—she just might be able to pull it off.

There was no place in her plan, however, for a normal person like Nina. Nevertheless, she had to ask—although the question shocked even Nina herself as it left her lips.

“...So...why me...?”

She realized she was indulging the insanity, that she should've rejected the deranged plan from the start. But she needed to know why.

Did Think choose Nina among a number of other capable candidates? That couldn't be it; nobody was able to keep up with Think Nirvalen in the first place.

Was it because they weren't particularly close? No, that couldn't be it, either. Think Nirvalen wasn't close to *anyone*.

These weren't the sort of answers Nina was hoping for.

“...Pardon? Why, Niiina, I thought you had a thing for me?”

ground beginning to crumble beneath her feet as she looked into Think's lifeless eyes.

"Of c-c-course not!! Me? Reject *you*?! I w-w-w-would never even dream of it—"

She quickly denied Think's claim, then paused for a moment.

She decided she would think about whether she had a crush on her elder later.

Nina definitely looked up to and respected Think—and also felt like she wouldn't make it out of there alive if she said no to the proposal. So she asked the next logical question.

"A-a-are you sure I'm...*good enough* for you...?"

Think Nirvalen liked herself. She wouldn't use Nina just for the sake of it. Why pick someone who would just weigh her down on her quest to destroy the world? Nor would Think like Nina just because Nina liked her.

So why? Think came close and looked Nina directly in her eyes, which were begging this very question. She was so close, their lips almost touched. As Nina's heart began to beat faster, she thought back to a long time ago.

This was what she'd hoped for that day she decided she wanted to get to know Think Nirvalen. After searching Nina's eyes for a moment, Think seemed to have an epiphany.

"Mm. 🎵 I need you, Nina. Well...aaactually..." She nodded with satisfaction and smiled the same way she had on that day:

"I need someone who knows me more than I do—you, Niiina. You need to win the game."

Nina finally understood what was going on.

She didn't just want to know Think Nirvalen—she wanted more. It was that simple. On that day, with just a look—just a *smile*...

.....she had fallen madly in love with Think.

This absolute genius—my beloved—needs me. She needs my help to destroy the world as if it were only a game. After all, she can't do it alone. But together—we can do it together. How can I reject a proposal like that?

The world spun on its axis in a never-ending cycle of meaningless destruction. The world was a game. Maybe it was worth a shot—to try to become the one who did the spinning for once. To become a player.

The idea was growing on Nina when the next words that came out of her elder's mouth decided everything for her.

"Not to mention, if I'm going to choose a partner, I might as well choose a cuuute one. ♥"

"I'll go submit this thesis! I'll be back soon—could you take care of your wounds while I'm gone?!"

Hello, world? Nice to meet you. Enjoy being destroyed by the two of us!

Kainas? Thanks for everything, but I don't remember asking you to create us Elves!

I—I...I will live for love!!!

Who cares if I need to destroy a world or two? Her smile is enough to make me do anything!

Nina moved like the wind that day.



That gust of lovestruck wind had a thought:

I sure am glad I let that tempest Think Nirvalen send me any which way she pleases.

It didn't matter to her that her role in the master plan pretty much amounted to putting Think in the bath, washing her, and changing her clothes. Or that every day ended with utter exhaustion after using every last one of her five spells to manage their daily routine!

Hidden beneath Nina Clive's abode was a small laboratory. One of the walls was covered in various seals, while books and other documents were scattered wildly throughout the facility.

"Hee-hee... That collar looks good on you, Niiina. Why, go ahead and give me a nice 'woof'!"

Nina's all-powerful elder had dozed off in her chair, a snot bubble appearing from her nose with every snore. Drool dribbled down her cheek; whatever dream her beloved elder was having, it didn't seem to be going well for Nina. But Nina still adored her. She had zero regrets. None whatsoever... In fact, Nina was starting to respect Think even more.

Maybe I should give up on life and become a bum like her. She wondered if that would help her further understand Think. Then she came to the same conclusion she always reached when she toyed with the idea—that she could never do it. She didn't even want to in the first place...!!

"...Elder... You truly are incredible... I—I could never live like this...!"

"

began trembling and let out a small shriek.

“Wh-whaaat is this apparition...?! N-Niina, there’s someone in heere!!”

“...Yeah... Don’t be too shocked, but sometimes I’m in my house.”

Think didn’t remember what she had done to Nina earlier when Nina returned home. Well, more like she was half-asleep, as always...

“...Anyway... *Ahem...*” Nina said, her tired eyes staring off into the distance. “We successfully captured the In-Sein Nebia... It went just as you predicted.”

She didn’t have the energy to get mad over the fact that she almost died doing it a second time. She knew it wasn’t worth it, and continued:

“We also have a proposal from the Akasha HQ about how to handle the Phantasma’s core. They have suggestions on creating a spell furnace and testing the core’s criticality. Here are two more reports from the war headquarters: one public and one top secret. This document describes the current lack of military personnel in the capital—”

Think watched as Nina piled report after report onto her desk.

“I literally just woooke up... I might just have to sue you for overworking a regular old civilian liiike myself. 🎵 Do you think you can handle all this foor—?”

Think turned around in her chair and propped her chin on its headrest as she pleaded with Nina like a child.

“No, I can’t!! Also, we’d have a big problem if there were civilians like you running around.”

To start off with—even at the Akasha HQ, there weren’t many people who understood how Think’s latest rite worked. She’d made it while keeping tabs on military strategy, top secret information, and other developments. No one else could do this. That’s why she was the Grand Magus. Nina, on the other hand—

“You do realize I majored in divination, right? *Not* pretending to be the Grand Magus.”

“I know thaaat! ...Why, you should thank me—I saved you from wasting your life studying something as impossible as divination... I know! How about you thank meee by kissing my feet?”

“It wasn’t considered impossible until that darn thesis you gave me!”

The thesis Think had given Nina was a series of notes Think had scribbled down onto a bunch of papers.

Her thesis was titled “The Temporal Plurality of Spirits.” The gist was that space and time were unified in the spirit gallery; it was more

than enough to have Nina graduate from the Garden. Overkill, even. In fact, the thesis completely revolutionized how Elves perceived magic.

“Do you have any idea what I went through?! My peers despised me after I became the Grand Magus and pretty much debunked the entire major with your principle of indeterminate possibilities!!”

The principle of indeterminate possibilities... To put it simply:

Not even a god can know the future, dumbass. smh

Nina’s classmates never forgave her for what she did to the major.

“Divination was the one thing I thought I could learn to help you...” Nina started tearing up.

“Nina, I don’t need you to be able to see the fuuuture,” Think said with a forced smile. Nina didn’t know what she meant. “Hmm, I can hardly think straight. Maybe I’m not fully awake yet... Why, I need some stimulation. 🎵”

Not fully awake, you say? You were awake enough earlier to summon a creature from another world...

Still teary-eyed, Nina sighed at Think’s request for stimulation. “I expected as much, so...I bought some more of those, um...naughty books...you’re so fond of...,” she said haltingly.

She then took out an opaque bag full of reading material: Think’s usual erotic novels. Think claimed she couldn’t get her work done without reading a couple of these first. Nina wondered what the bookstore staff thought about Nina Clive...the Grand Magus...buying such books—from the men’s section, no less—so often.

Nina held back tears as she proffered the novels, but Think appeared to have something else in mind.

“Forget the books—I feel like playing with your cute little tits todaaay. That should get me going. 🎵”

“Whaaat?! P-please don’t!! I...I don’t even have—”

“Have boobs to play wiiith? I know—how about I liiick them instead? ♥”

Excuse me?!

“Why, I feel like that’s juuust the thing I need. You can pay me back laaater. 🎵”

Think steamrolled Nina like a sexual bulldozer. This situation had several definitions of harassment written all over it. Nina backed away despite knowing she didn’t have a say in what was about to happen.

“Okay...I’ll try and make it extra niice for you. ♥”

Think turned toward her desk and snapped her fingers—the seals etched into the wall began to glow. This was followed by the space

around them *snapping* in a similar fashion. Think's demeanor, the light, the smell—everything about the space and time they occupied had changed in an instant.

An incredible volume of spirits filled the air, so dense that it overwhelmed the young penta-caster. Nina knew they were both still in her basement—in Think's underground laboratory. The now faintly glowing rite inscribed on the wall had altered and expanded this very space.

It was as if they were in another dimension.

The room where Think did all her research was now larger than the entire Akasha HQ. The difference in size wasn't what made the space otherworldly, though.

Below them was a gargantuan dome-shaped hall; inside was an altar made of thorns, supported by eighty-six thorny columns. Etched into the dome were countless seals that pulsed like veins. A multilayered crystalline structure sat at the altar's center like some sort of offering.

This structure emitting an ominous light—was a massive water lily bud.

These were rites of spirit-breaking—a new type of magic credited to Nina. These ultimate multifold composite rites operated under the protection of the Elves' creator—Kainas, god of the forest. By exploiting the ether Kainas used to protect the Elf homeland, these new rites caused spirits to disintegrate, thereby generating exorbitant amounts of power.

The rites of spirit-breaking used Kainas's ether like firewood; naming them Anse, which meant protection, was Think's idea of irony.

[Even a shitty god is a god. I'm just glad our god finally gets to serve a purpose.]

Think said this to Nina telepathically. Saying such a thing aloud may have resulted in divine punishment being dealt right then and there.

...That's right: The Akasha Project was a team of scientists working on one of the four Anses.

The thorns, the dome, and the water lily bud: These were the three other rites of spirit-breaking. But no one knew about them other than their inventor, Think—and Nina.

Nina was dumbfounded every time she set eyes on Think's creations, and every time, she would ask the same question.

"Elder...why are you hiding these from the Akasha HQ?"

Nina—no...no one knew the answer to that, except for Think.

Something bugged Nina as she listened to the explanation of what these rites could do: large-scale shifting. Magic deactivation. Spirit disintegration.

Nina knew that creating and eventually using these rites in war would likely leave another race helpless to defend themselves.

“Niiina...have you ever played a card game before?”

Think followed up her own question the same way she always did:

“You don’t reveal your trump card until the very laaast moment: the showdown.”

Think grinned as she loomed over her precious creations. They were nothing more than cards to her. The same went for her giant laboratory and all its gadgets: mere tools, every last one of them.

She was eyeing her massive desk—another dimension, in a sense. This was Think Nirvalen’s world—a game. Laid across the desk were a multitude of squares etched into a map...and thousands of chess pieces.

This is Think’s world, Nina thought before correcting herself a moment later. Think had a slight smile on her face as she read through Nina’s report, her gaze razor-sharp.

“...With the exception of the Dwaaarves, the races are oh so predictable...as allways.”

Think repositioned each of the chess pieces one after the other. She looked like a completely different person as she moved the pieces to show how the War—nay, the game—was playing out across the world. In other words, Think Nirvalen herself was the world.

“.....Elder... Why can’t you always be this serious...?”

This is the same person who only moments ago wanted to lick my breasts...

Nina’s melancholic sighs of lament went unheard.

“...Why, now that we have the core...hee-hee...it’s almost time for our final showdown.”

Think snickered; the In-Sein Nebia was in her grasp. Nina’s gaze fell to the chessboard; she saw the critical situation the Elves were in and frowned dubiously.

They had at last captured and controlled a Phantasma, although it hadn’t been without significant failure. The Elves had once collaborated with the Fairies to try and control a Phantasma known as the Cloud Vortex. Their eventual failure resulted in their test subject going berserk. This forced another race of magical beings—the Flügel—to intervene and clean up their mess. The Elves had been on the

Flügel's bad side ever since.

Their failure also revealed the spatial boundary where Spratul—the home of the Fairies—existed, inviting an attack from the Demonia race. In order to help their Fairy allies, the Elves were forced to fight on multiple fronts. The situation was dire; the Elves paid a huge price to capture the Phantasma and complete the Akasha Project.

Nina still didn't understand how they got there, though, so she asked the question that was on everyone's mind:

"Elder...how did you know the Phantasma was going to appear?"

Nina—no...not even the woman from Akasha HQ had known the Phantasma was coming.

"Hmm? I didn't. You know we can't predict their movements, dooon't you?"

"...Huh? Oh... I know, but...um...what I'm trying to ask is—"

A Phantasma was a vaguely sentient natural calamity. Predicting their movements was nearly impossible. This was particularly true for the In-Sein Nebia. Hence why Nina asked, and why Think continued to answer her.

"Why, I had the *moles* bring it heeere for us. ♥"

.....

.....*Okay, calm down, Nina Clive.*

Nina knew by now that it wasn't good for her to get riled up about every little thing Think said. She took a deep breath: *Let's take a moment to calm down and think this through...*

"The D-D-D-Dwarves brought that to us?! B-b-but howww?!"

As always, Think accelerated Nina's violent spiral into confusion.

"I don't know. ♥ I'll figure it out so that it'll be easier to catch the neeext one. 🎵"

No...no, no, no... That's not how these things work.

Nina assumed Think knew the Phantasma was going to appear, but that hadn't been the case: Her battle strategy banked on the Dwarves bringing it to them.

But she didn't actually know *how* they would do that?!

So she planned the whole thing on the Dwarves bringing the Phantasma—without even knowing if it was possible—then proceeded to turn the plan on its head?!

"Why, it's simplllle, really... Take a look at the nooortthern front."

Think placed her hands over the desk, and the chess pieces began moving on their own in a sort of instant replay. The pieces that

represented the Dwarves Nina had fought with were moving two spaces at a time. Though they came from the east, they had moved around to the north to mount an attack. Think tilted her head and continued:

“Whyyy would they bring so few ships to Helruin?”

“Hmm... I wonder...”

“If *he* had been stupid enough to think this high-speed fleet was capable of infiltrating our most well-guarded territoryyy...why, this game would already be over. ♪”

A straight charge from the Dwarven forces would certainly end in victory for the Elves. Even Nina knew that—so what was *he* planning on doing?!

“He had something up his sleeve—and I figured out what it waaas. ♥”

If only the Dwarves hadn’t attacked head-on and instead used the In-Sein Nebia elsewhere... Wait—?!

“That’s a huge stretch!! How on earth did you know he had a Phantasma—?!”

“Why, of course I knew. He *needed* to bring it along, after allll.”

We risked our lives over that titanic leap of logic, Nina wanted to scream, but Think cut her off, turned back to her desk, and pointed to a giant chess piece.

“Why would they come allll the way from the northern sea to attack Helruin?”

Indeed, there was no reason for the Dwarves, coming from the east, to move all the way north and cross the sea. Had they attacked from the east, they could’ve also brought troops on the ground for an even larger offensive. Nina couldn’t even figure out why they chose Helruin in the first place.

The battleships were moving fast... Did they intend on ambushing us?

Nina shook her head; that couldn’t be it. The Dwarves weren’t the type to hide in the shadows. So why had they approached from the sea...?

Think smiled as she watched Nina fail to come up with a good reason. Then she explained:

“Why, there was no real rhyme or reason to their attack on Helruin.”

“.....Come again?”

“But taking the northern route—that was their winning strategy.”

It didn’t matter *where* the Dwarves attacked. In other words...!

“They thought they could win any baaattle—so long as they came from the northern sea.”

They had a way to beat the Elves in their most fortified city. They could attack from the sea to keep the Elves from seeing their ace in the hole: the fog of death.

“Those moles had a way to predict the Phantasma’s movements... but not a way to controool it. 🎵 So they got it angry—”

—and used their greatest asset—their high-speed airships—to provoke the Phantasma!!

“Then they retreated as quickly as they could to the nearest Elven city. ♥”

“.....”

Nina listened to Think explain the plan as if it were her own idea. She had a point, though... Usually, the sight of the In-Sein Nebia alone would be enough to send the Elven forces into chaos. They probably wouldn’t have been able to escape the Phantasma. The chain of command would deteriorate in all the confusion. There likely would’ve been no survivors. The Dwarves would then penetrate their defenses and lay waste to a helpless Helruin.

That is, if their hand hadn’t been read by the Elves, who stood their ground and didn’t let a single ship pass. The rest is history.

Think began fiddling with the chess piece in her hand.

“I’m going to figure out howww they predicted the Phantasma’s appearance—and use it for our army. 🎵”

Think smirked. Nina finally understood what had happened and started shivering.

Can’t predict where the Phantasma will show up? Just find someone who can!

The Elves had won more than just the battle, or even the capture of a single Phantasma—they had acquired a new tactic they could use in the future by stealing the Dwarves’ method of anticipating the Phantasma’s movements. Nina shuddered at the thought, then remembered something Think had said to her earlier.

“It’s simple, really... We just need to kill everything on the plaaanet. ♥”

Think had so gleefully declared whoever was left standing once the world was destroyed would win this game.

She wanted to use every last drop of her power to annihilate

everyone and surpass even the gods.

Now, however, she called it by its name: the rite that would allow her to do all this.

“...Áka Si Anse—all that’s left is to tryyy it out... 🎵”

This was the goal of the Akasha Project: the final rite of spirit-breaking.

were no such things as limits. Nina knew that Think embodied limitless possibilities, but she quelled these feelings to ask the question that needed to be asked.

“B-but Elder... Do you really think the Dwarves—er, *he* will let you pull it off...?”

The *moles*—the Dwarf race—weren’t even a footnote in Nina and Think’s eyes. The two of them referred to their sole enemy as *he* and *him* in order to pay him the respect he deserved. *He* was the only one who dared to play against Think in this massive game of chess. The only soul to ever make Think get serious—and the only person she wasn’t able to crush.

Lóni Drauvnir.

Nina had yet to meet him, while Think had only ever met him once. And yet—they knew that just like Think, he was a consummate leader. He was pulling all the strings in battle.

Dwarves couldn’t cast magic without a catalyst. Just another reason they were lesser creatures. Lóni, however, had figured out how to engrain core rites into weapons to create what are called spirit arms. Just like how Think formulated new spells and magic, he crafted new weapons. A genius just like Think, the only person in this world who had ever made her taste defeat—another player in the game of war.

Nina knew this was a war between the two of them.

She figured he must be tremendously intellectual, rational, and most importantly, attractive. Think recognized his prowess, to the point where she knew she couldn’t defeat him on her own. He made Think realize that she and Nina had to use everything at their disposal to go against him. Nina respected him—envied him, even. More than anything, she felt a deep sadness when she thought about him.

...Such a shame he had to be born a disgusting, smelly mole. What could he have possibly done to deserve such a cruel and unusual punishment?!

Nina mused about how unfair the world could be. Think smiled.

“Needless to say, *he* won’t be an issue. Here’s my last question for you.”

She returned the board back to its original placement and glanced happily at the fleet of Dwarves Nina had fought earlier.

“...Whyyy do they have all their firepower here?”

“Huh? Wasn’t that so...they could ambush us with the Phantasma?”

“Correct. 🎵 And we caught their little Phantasma...”

Think smirked. Not at Nina, but at the chessboard—no—at Lóni Drauvnir. It was as if Think could see him at the other side of the board. She asked her next question in singsong.

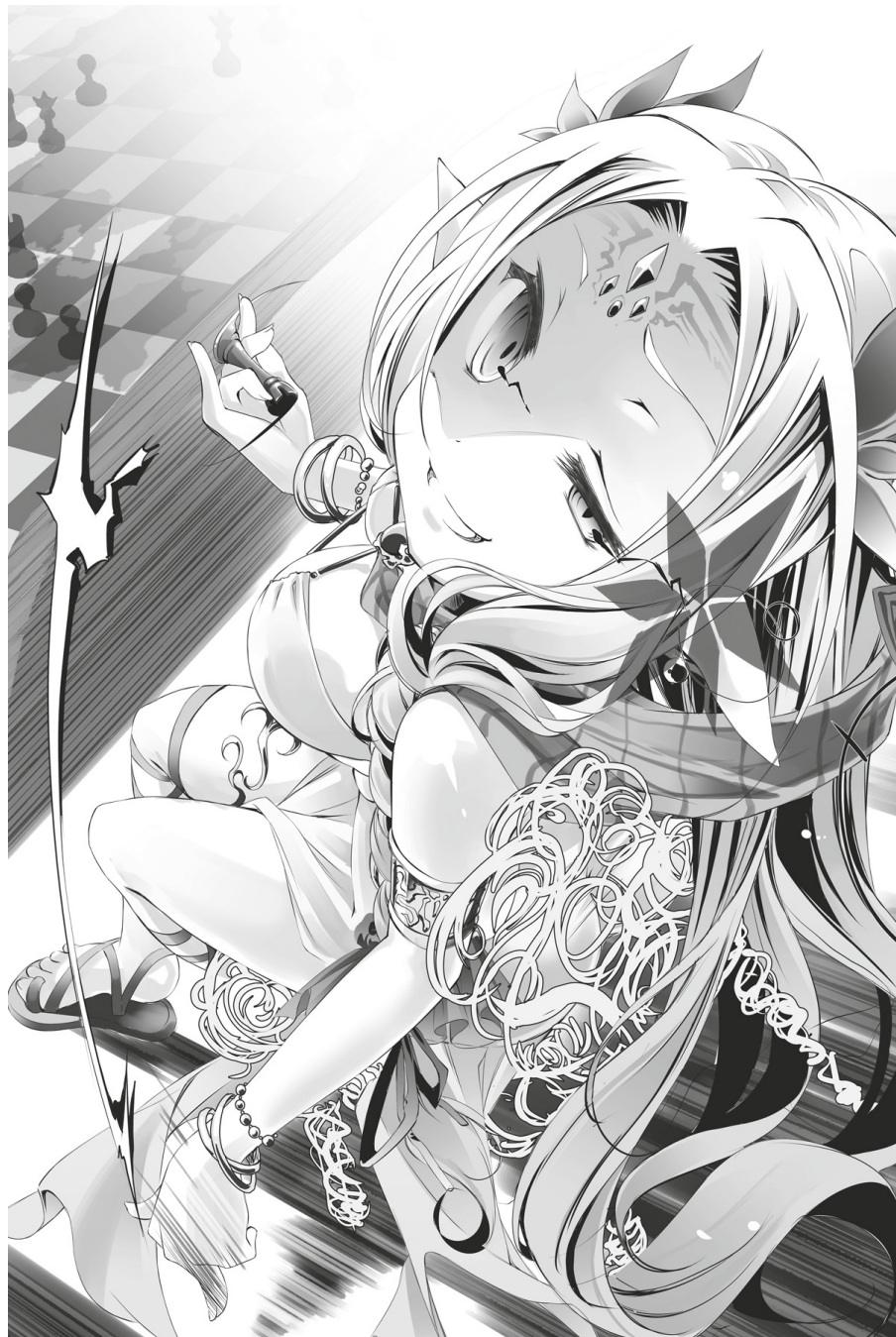
“Now that their main army knows we have the Phantasma...what do you thiiink they’re doing? 🎵”

“

soldiers.

The éva-le-siela and vá-lu-plum airships are no match for the bulk of the Dwarven army—!! Think appeared to be enjoying how distressed Nina was by all this.

“Why, we’re mooore than a match for them.” Think was grinning from ear to ear. “I’ve got a nice, biiig present for those dirty moles. A brand-new military asset. ♥”



“We have the perfect bomb righhht here in our capital. ♥”

Think grinned fiendishly as she pointed to the ground below her. Nina’s prayers were in vain. Think couldn’t look more elated.

No point in praying if she’s gonna destroy the planet and all the gods with it...

“Yeah...it’s perfect all right—**perfect enough to kill you and me, too, isn’t it?!**”

Nina tearfully pointed out this little detail and managed to cling to a semblance of her sanity. A lot more was on the line than just their own lives. Was Think going to blow up Áka Si Anse right under Melryln?

Two hundred thousand Elves, the Senate, the sanctuary...hell, the entire forest would be decimated. Sure, Áka Si Anse would make quick work of the entire Dwarf armada—but she was forgetting one little detail.

“Is there even a point in killing the Dwarves if there are no Elves left?!” Nina hollered in a panic.

Think pouted. “Mmm? Niiina? Whooose fault is it that the capital has been left defenseless?”

“...The failed Phantasma experiment was—wait, that’s *my* fault?! But those were *your* orders!!”

“*Siiigh*... And whooose fault was it the Dwarves are going to attack the capital?”

“Are you trying to blame me for capturing the Phantasma?! Even though that was your plan, too?!”

“Okay...so whooo made Áka Si Anse functional in the first place?”

“The...Dwarves...brought the Phantasma...

breaking hidden away?!

No...way. No freakin' way—!!

There was only one justification for detonating Áka Si Anse under the capital.

Nina was speechless. Think affirmed her suspicions by showing her the palms of both her hands. In other words:

“It’s time for our showdown. It’s time to show our haaands.”

Everything she’d spent the past ten years—no, decades—doing. Every military tactic and strategy in place from here on out.

Everything was in the palm of her slender hand.

Nina stood there, shocked and dumbfounded. Think merely chuckled as she continued.

“Niiina? Theoretically...what is the maaaximum damage Áka Si Anse can cause with the current test spell furnace?”

Under twenty percent. That’s enough to destroy the heart of the capital—no, it would only destroy the heart of the city! It’s not enough to defeat all of the Dwa—

“Niiina? How will the Dwarves pose their attack on the city... when they are trying to learn about the Phantasmaaa?”

That was easy. There was a 90 percent chance—no, 100 percent chance that they would surround the capital.

The Dwarves’ goal was to figure out how to utilize the Phantasma. The Elven capital’s defenses were unusually paltry—it couldn’t be a more obvious trap. Worst-case scenario, the Dwarves would end up fighting the Phantasma. Surrounding the city was their only option.

“Niiina? In that case, which of the three rites of spirit-breaking would be the best to uuuse?” Think asked as she gazed at the three structures below them.

Elder... How long have you been planning all this...?

Nina didn’t even need to ask the question. She knew why the Akasha Project HQ had been set up here. The test furnace’s power, its effects, the capital being left defenseless—there was no need to ask such a foolish question when the answer was staring her right in the face.

Think had been planning this from the very beginning. Maybe even since the day she asked Nina for her help—!

“I have *five cards* up my sleeve. Why, think of them as my trump caaards, my aces in the hole for defeating *him* and the entiire Dwarf armada.”

Think smiled from ear to ear. She spun around in her chair and faced Nina.

“Do you think he’ll see any of this coming...Niiina?” she asked in earnest, now almost nose to nose with Nina as she gazed into her eyes.

“There’s *nothing* they can do... Even if they know something is coming, they won’t be able to defend themselves against a weapon this powerful!” Nina replied, then began shaking uncontrollably. Think’s smile never wavered.

Best-case scenario, they got away with destroying just half the city. This was their sole chance to defeat *him*, though. They wouldn’t get another. *He* was the only enemy worth defeating—the only one Think knew she couldn’t kill alone.

The Great War was a product of these two players—Think and Lóni—turning the gears of the world.

Nina herself smiled when she internally dared the man to predict their five trump cards. Even if he managed to read a card or two, Nina knew Think would be one step ahead of him.

...*Hmm?* Nina only saw four rites of spirit-breaking here: three, plus Áka Si Anse...

“...? What did you mean by five—? **GYAAAAAAH?!?!?**”

“Why, things are about to get rough! I’d better lick your little titties while I still caaan!!”

Nina tried to ask about the fifth card, but was ravaged by Think before she could.

“Nom... ♥ You have the flaaattest chest I’ve ever seen—*slurrrp*—but it works. ♪”

Stripped of her shirt, Nina was helpless in resisting the octacaster’s relentless licking. Think nommed and nommed away at Nina’s modest bosom. The most Nina could do to resist the relentless tonguing was to accept it was going to happen and think of something else.

The Great War—which had raged on for an eternity—was going to end. Think Nirvalen was really going to pull it off. She found a way to destroy the *planet*. She had the world and its gods wrapped around her finger—but she wasn’t the only one in that position.

Lóni Drauvnir was in the same league. It didn’t matter which of them brought the game to an end... The world’s destruction was at hand.

As Nina thought more about this, she was met with a fleeting pang of anxiety.

What if...Think and Lóni aren’t alone?

What if...someone outmaneuvered them: a third player who toyed with the world just as they did?

...Regardless, the Great War was almost over. It was inevitable...

Nobody could stop what was coming.....



A few days passed.

The black ash had accumulated over the desert like a sheet of glistening snow, where a single figure in a coat and mask could be seen. They were looking up at the ash—which had an azure tint to it as it fell from the blood-colored sky—and waiting. No one had called them here, nor was anyone expecting them. They were, after all, about to be ambushed.

These two weren't supposed to ever meet. They couldn't read each other's thoughts. And yet—she *knew* he would come.

The sky, even the terrain was strangely similar to that day long ago—the day he told her “*Until we play again. I'll kill you myself.*”

He would be here. He had to. Otherwise, this War—this game—would never truly end.

After a long while of waiting, another figure slowly made its way toward her. Their large frame was similarly clad in a coat and mask.

This was it. They had finally been reunited. They had both wished for this confrontation ever since their last.

Neither of them removed their masks despite their reunion, which was just as miraculous as it was inevitable. Neither of them needed to see each other's faces to know who they were, but they could tell exactly what they had brought with them.

Think Nirvalen was the one who had been waiting.

She had rewritten the laws of magic twice, turning it into something of an art. That made her practically omnipotent. She was an epoch-making octa-caster and a mage the caliber of which the world would likely never see again. Behind her was the expansive forest in which lay the Elven capital of Melryln—the territory of the forest god, Kainas.

And it was Lóni Drauvnir who approached her.

The man who had revolutionized engineering with the use of catalysts and seal rites. He was an unprecedented user of spirit arms and a catalyst craftsman the caliber of which the world would never see again. On his back, he carried a giant iron sword twice his own height—the catalyst for his seal rites, one of his spirit arms. Farther behind him, the sky was filled with the imposing sight of hundreds of bulky airships.

“.....”

The two of them kept their distance, trying to gauge the other's power. Two unparalleled geniuses silently readying their weapons. There was nothing for them to say during this fateful reunion. Everything that needed to be said had been the day he vowed to kill her by his own hand—that they would strike each other down. That much was certain.

This was a game. The more players there were manipulating the world, the more interesting it was. But there was only one world to be taken, one prize—and there was always a winner and a loser.

“.....Squad Eight—engage defensive formation one.”

—and that was Nina. She continued to calmly whisper her orders with pinpoint focus.

She didn't call for breaking up the Dwarves' attack or striking back.

Everyone knew why: There were too many of them. Even if the Elves could block their bombardment, each two-hundred-Elf squad could only last so long. They needed to switch between squads to keep the barrier up and running, and even that wasn't very sustainable. A counterattack was out of the question. Sending out a battalion or two to fight the armada would be like pissing in the ocean.

Not to mention, the enemy's throngs of metal airships were state-of-the-art. Each shot fired was followed by an invisible trail and two loud explosions. It pierced their first wall, only to be caught by a second. The Elves couldn't afford to let up their defense.

The airships' amplified spirits were being condensed into an energy too fine to be seen by the naked eye. These were the most ships the Elven forces had ever been up against, and new models at that... It could very well be the entire Dwarf fleet—

“Grand Magus! The enemy fleet is positioning to flank the city

reaction was only natural. She had never seen Think out on the field before—let alone using the full extent of her power. Those flashes of destruction were likely the results of Think's thesis on the convergence of space-time within the spirit gallery. She could speed through time itself—probably something she thought up following her defeat by Lóni—and yet, she still couldn't shake him off.

Think was undoubtedly going far beyond the limits of the Elves—no, the limits of all living things. Nina closed her eyes as Think weaved in and out of time to approach the Dwarf—

“Well...Elder will still come out victorious. Resist as you may, but please accept your death in the end.”

—and offered a brief elegy.

Nina Clive watched as the shadows of the giant ships encroached around the capital's airspace, then flew back home—she needed to prepare for the imminent showdown.



Apparently, Nina didn't know it was impossible to control time.

As long as living things existed in a fixed point in time—no, even if they had the same plurality as spirits, which allowed them to span across time—going into the past would produce infinite present-day worlds, while the indeterminate possibilities of future worlds prevented anyone from time-traveling forward.

So Think focused on a single point of time and expanded only that, to make time effectively move quicker for herself.

An attack was coming straight for her as she sped through time. No—a two-pronged attack. Lóni had slashed with his sword and released a wave of scorching heat that sliced through a grotesque sand giant Think had transmuted. Think was moved—she only barely managed to avoid the blow via her enhanced grasp of time.

Lóni's sword—the spirit arm of his own invention... Ah... It was truly...

(It's like a work of aaart. I absolutely looove his weapon. ♥)

She never could have dreamed of feeling such a way about anything. Think held the man in utmost reverence as she deflected the attack that followed.

Unlike gods, Dwarves definitely existed, but they were an unquestionably lower form of life. They had incredible physical prowess befitting their poor intellect, but not to the extent of those piece of shit Werebeasts. Dwarves were unable to use magic without catalysts; they couldn't multi-cast or even approach the level of Elf magic.

This clashed with Think's aesthetics. She hated incompleteness more than anything else. In her eyes, Dwarves were essentially lower than fungus. So how incredibly ironic that the rites Dwarves engraved into their spirit arms provided her a spark of inspiration.

“

Now covered in sand, ash, and soot, Think looked up in anticipation of a counterattack ...and found Lóni on his knees. It appeared he hadn't made it out of the explosion unscathed, either.

He was looking at his spirit arms, many of which had been reduced to dust, and laughing. Think began laughing as well; she finally took in everything that had transpired in their brief interaction.

The next moment, Lóni reached for the hundreds of blades scattered in midair. With incredible skill, he began juggling the knives, recompiling them into his greatsword. Their numerous seal rites fit together like pieces of a puzzle; it was an incredible feat much like multi-casting.

Before long, he recreated the effect Think's spatial distortion spell had on their surroundings

defeat Lóni Drauvnir.

That is—she couldn't defeat him *alone*—!!

Think looked behind Lóni to the steel airships encroaching upon the forested capital. It was just as she'd planned since the day he'd defeated her—not a moment went by when she didn't think about it, even in her dreams.

Every last detail, from where he was standing to the airships' positions, even the color of the sky and smell of the wind, was exactly as she'd imagined.

Think spread her arms wide and announced to Lóni with the most devilish of grins:

“Why—it's tiiime for our showdown. ♥”

It was time for her to unleash the five trump cards she had hidden. Her grin grew more twisted as she summoned her first card. She shot a spell into the ground below her as she called out for the first rite of spirit-breaking.

It was the name she had given the thorny columns she had created:

“

something she'd laid out piece by piece.

spread out from the city and could be heard by any in the vicinity for about a tenth of the continent. Anyone who heard the shrieking and howling also heard the silence that made it seem like time itself had stopped.

There was a simple reason for this: All spirits within range of this one rite had been temporarily erased from existence.

coming! It's written all over his stupid face!! The world is in the palm of my hand; the time is nigh to destroy it and win this little game! the Elf genius thought as she leaped forward.

The man let out a lone scoff. Nothing more.

With his ships falling from the sky, and Think fast approaching him, he realized she was no longer speeding through time. Despite all the confusion, he managed to figure out that all magic had ceased functioning; it was quite incredible. He did all he could do. He tried to power his way out of the flower prison with his greatsword.

Lóni swung his sword faster than Think could perceive it, but to no avail...

“

his preparation, only to be outdone and fall into a trap—and yet, he knew what he had to do. He knew if he was going to make it out of here alive, he had only one chance

burning passion into carving a seal rite into the flower's 137 petals. It was a gift made especially for him and him alone.

The only flower of its kind in the world, a glass lily that would bloom for but a single moment

only the knowledge that you lost to me. The thought crossed Think's mind as she laughed to herself.

Áka Si Anse was at critical mass within their test furnace. Even at 20 percent full power, it was enough to turn Melryln's center into a crater.

So what if it cost a city or two? Getting rid of the entire Dwarf armada and every living soul who bore witness to the spirit-breaking rites was more than worth it.

It was a deal too good to pass up. And she wasn't going to.

Lóni didn't have a way to understand everything that was happening, but he had a good idea of what she was trying to do.

"...Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Lóni looked like he was thoroughly enjoying himself, but he also couldn't hide his frustration. He began saying something in the Dwarven tongue.

It was a truly disgusting, crude language; a blight on the ears.

"Well done, woman. I enjoyed our little game. So what's your final trump card?"

Taking a lot of liberties with the translation, Think gathered this was what he was trying to communicate.

She had actually taken the time to study the moles' awful language. She smiled as she responded.

"Why, I won't reveal that until the veery end... I'm not telling. ♥
"

She thought about her fifth and final trump card, which was actually her first, as well as the only and biggest reason she was able to match Lóni.

It was the knowledge that she couldn't beat him on her own.

Think, the one true genius, knew herself. And she likewise knew it was impossible for anyone to really know themselves. So she found someone who didn't know her and knew they never *could* know her, but would still believe in her all the same—

(I have a suuuper special trump card, but youuu won't get to see her. ♥)

Think kept the thought to herself as she touched Ag Ni Anse and began to utter the word "destruction," a final "up yours."

Nothing would be left of Lóni once this spell was deployed; the word was about to leave her lips, when...

"

...before Think could get it all the way out—before Lóni could meet his death—the two of them instinctively froze.

They saw a little girl who had fallen from the sky



This smiling creature; this irregularity

Elves suffered, or their loss of all magic-related knowledge?! Nina certainly didn't! It was nothing compared to the days when Think kept everything a secret from her!

Everything we did for all those years—the many strings we pulled! The many victories we saw to fruition!

It's nothing compared to finally putting Lóni Drauvnir in his place

Compared to how tough it must've been for her to come out of her rut, this is nothing!!

Otherworldly tentacles pumped their aphrodisiac ooze into Nina's skin, which only made her all that much gladder to see Think.

"Your sheer courage is an inspiration! I can hardly believe you haven't bathed in twenty-four years with all that matted hair, and even though the ghastly smell is enough to make me **gaaaAAAH!!**"

"Urrrgh, it's been sooo long since I spoke with anyone, I'm having a hard time making out what you're trying to tell me... Why, were you saying something about wanting a tentacle pounding? ♥"

"It was a slip of the tongue!! I was just going to say your fragrance smells as beautiful as always— **GYAAAH!!**"

Think must've dialed up her magic, because the tentacles' assault intensified. As much as Nina resisted, she could feel them fondling her in all the right places. Perhaps it was the resulting rush of blood to her head that brought her back to her senses with an audible screech.

Same old Think? Same old tentacular antics?

were nothing more than the smallest of marginal errors...

It certainly wasn't good that the Dwarves knew about the four other rites of spirit-breaking.

The loss of the Elven capital, the destruction of the Dwarf armada... These were devastating for both camps. With the Elves and the Dwarves at a loss for resources, they needed to find a new way to wage war. The result: Various races formed alliances with other races to keep the fighting going.

Where did this bring the Great War? Battles took on a new strategy: Gather as many of your enemies as possible into one place and destroy them in one large attack. This was seen as the new way to end the Great War—to bring an end to the game. The key to victory was this one final move: Kú Li Anse.

“My path to viiiictory is going as smoothly as possible. ♥”

The fate of the War was still very well in the palm of Think's petite hand.

The transcendent smile on Think's beautiful face sent a shiver down Nina's spine.

“Pardon

snap of her fingers, she was fully dressed. Nina nodded deeply.

Who was this intruder here for? No—who did they know what about, and how much did they know?



Nina could tell that Think was going find this out for herself and silence the intruder for good...

"...How do you do? I'm afraid I've made myself at home."

There sat a ghost, his face twisted in a smile that reached his dark, unsettling eyes.



...Then, when a stupefied Nina witnessed this unbelievable sight—

"E-Elder! You sure I shouldn't follow it...? No, *let me follow it!!*"

She leaped out of the shadows, intending to go after the so-called ghost as it made its exit. Nina had no idea what *it* was, nor would she have any reason to. Think's silence, and the palpable hostility in the air, spoke volumes. It was clear that *she hadn't gotten an ounce of information* from this visitor.

Whatever *it* was, it toyed with Think as if she were a child. Whatever *it* was—it was incredibly dangerous!! And yet...

"...Niiina, what did that look like to you...?"

"You're asking me...? How would I know if *you* don't even know?!"

Nina practically screamed her answer but proceeded to gulp audibly when she noticed Think's gaze, which asked:

Does that look like someone you should be following?

Nina had unconsciously hesitated to go after the intruder—and the dangers that would have followed. Think's gaze had stopped Nina in her tracks. Those eyes had halted her from impulsively giving chase. They were what kept Nina's resentment, humiliation, and loathing in check.

Nina took a deep breath and thought for a moment before speaking.

"...Whatever it was, I *think* it may be playing the same game we are... At least, that's what it looked like to me," Nina mumbled as she tried to make sense of what had just occurred.

Think, who had her head down with her cheek on her desk, waited patiently for Nina to continue. The ghost wore tattered rags and pelts—it was hard to make out whatever it was. Nina and Think had both witnessed the ghost; they heard its voice, watched its gaze and how it carried itself. They both knew this ghost was a player, and a formidable one at that.

Nevertheless, there was something off about the ghost. Nina

couldn't quite put her finger on it... Or rather:

“...I doubt anybody knows what that *thing* is.”

Nina was sure of herself this time. She looked into Think's eyes and thought:

Whatever that thing was—it really must have picked up that I was hiding behind the pillar. Which means it's capable of seeing through an octa-caster's disguises.

No one should be able to do that, let alone *have any reason to!*

Some more time passed, and Nina told Think what she thought about the entire exchange.

“I think they're playing the game with a *different set of rules...*”

Think Nirvalen was trying to win the War by destroying the planet. The same probably went for Lóni Drauvnir as well. No—in this world where even the gods went to war, everyone fought for largely the same purpose... But as for that ghost...

“They are aiming for an entirely different kind of victory—I... think...”

They weren't here to kill anyone, or claim victory for their own. Even Nina knew it didn't quite make sense, but for whatever reason, she was certain:

This ghost was the third player.

She recalled a fleeting anxiety she'd had once before, about another player who paid no mind to how the others played the game; someone who would end the Great War on their own terms—

“Mr. Ghost is after something a lot simpler than thaaat...” Think smiled big for Nina, who was quivering in fear. “Why...he's trying to do the exaaact same thing I am. ♥”

Think's plans... Nina had just listened to what they were: Form an alliance with the stronger races, team up against their common enemies—pit the entire world against Artosh, the creator.

Once she had them all in one place, she would use Kú Li Anse to wipe her enemies off the face of the planet. There was just one little difference, Think went on:

“He's pitting everyone's trump cards agaaaainst one another—his win by default through mutual destruction. ♪”

Learning of the E-bomb, a weapon that detonated the ether of the Old Dei, came as a great shock. Even more so if it really was the Dwarves who managed to create a weapon so lethal. The biggest surprise, however, was that it could overpower Think's Áka Si Anse. Those damned moles—if they weren't willing to learn their place, then

they needed to be eliminated from the planet.

“It only helps us if Mr. Ghost and his friends add fuel to the fiire.
♥”

Minor details aside, Áka Si Anse had been used out in the open—it was public knowledge. Lóni Drauvnir was bound to create something to rival it; Think expected as much. Hence why she was in such a hurry to prepare the fifth rite of spirit-breaking—

■■■

On that fateful day, Think Nirvalen went outside and gazed aimlessly at the sky. The warm sun beamed down on her; it was so warm that it almost made her sleepy.

All her long ears could hear was the sound of grass swaying in the wind, which only made her sleepier.

Her diamond-shaped pupils witnessed the answer to a question she'd asked herself for ages.

The sky was a deep, captivating blue color. Beams of warm, white light shone down upon her. Something had bested all warring parties, including the Elves and the Dwarves. Towering along the horizon was a gargantuan chess piece. Think chuckled to herself at what seemed like a joke.

Apparently this was the real color of the sky. With the unending Great War now over, the world had become so utterly beautiful... It was laughable—almost like a dream—but Think realized what this meant.....

She had lost.

.....Oh, not agaaain. How could I lose yet again...?

Even as the thought lingered in her mind, she felt neither shock nor anger.

I knew it.

She knew her biggest trump card would prevail... The *very card* Think had put all her faith into was standing next to her, seemingly in a trance:

“...Um... Elder...? Mind telling me what’s going on...?” Nina asked as she sank to the ground, dumbfounded.

Think was in the middle of asking herself the same question before she realized the answer. She looked at everything happening around them, and she knew. It was simple, really.

“The worrrld was destroyed. Basically...someone beat us to the puuunch... ♪”

They had lost the game. It was as simple as that. Think got to her feet after answering Nina’s question. She began walking with her usual elegance, and for a moment, she caught sight of the *ghost* off in the distance.

This self-proclaimed ghost was apparently some monkey called an Immanity. And he, along with an Ex Machina, had magnificently pulled all the strings to the very end.

And thus—

—the planet *alone* was destroyed...

Thus, the Immanity's desire to win the War without killing anyone—the contradiction that was his mission—had been accomplished. Think was embarrassed by her own incompetence.

I wish I'd thought of that...

Destroying the planet was much quicker than destroying each and every one of the races. Think could almost hear the ghost telling her this, and she could offer no response.

...But there was one thing she refused to concede, something she was sure of now that everything was said and done. She gazed up at the azure heavens.

Why would a victory of this nature decide the throne of the One True God?

"Ohhh... I'm such a fool... I caaan't believe I ever thought that windbag Kainas would be of any use."

No one said anything about a rule like thaaat...

Think cursed the worthless god incapable of communication in any shape or form. Think *hated* herself.

Just what are Old Dei...?

It was far too late to consider the question now, but if her hypothesis was correct...

That was the biggest reason for her defeat, her most foolish oversight. Think heaved a deep sigh and lamented:

"We should have killed that worthless piece of shit Kainas from the very staaart....."

"Wha—Elder?! Sure, that's true, but you shouldn't be saying that out loud!! Aren't you afraid of divine punishment?!"

Nina tried to silence Think, even though she'd just unwittingly agreed with her.

Yes, that was the old way of things...but not anymore. Think remembered what the cocky new "One True God," the snotty brat who had just rewritten the rules of the world, had said, and continued:

"Why...as a creator, do you have any right to sentence your creations to death if they defy youuu? That's like saying it's okay for a parent to kill their child just because they didn't listen. Why, I always thought the only throne our shitty little god Kainas deserved was made of porcelain. ♥"

She really laid it on the Old Deus. She'd wanted to get all this off

her chest for years—and she wanted to check a certain little something. Still panicked, Nina started walking with Think—until a figure appeared before them.

It was a man shouldering a recognizable mass of metal.

“Ló...Lóni Drauvnir

gain independence. Furthermore:

“If we wait for our incompetent god to start the game, we’ll only fall behiiind. 🎵”

Time was of the essence. Spoils were going to whoever could get their team up and running first. An opportunity for sure—but a predicament to end all predicaments. The Elves needed saving, and who was Think to deny them?

Sure, she’d lost a war. Time to start a *new one*.

The practical war game between her and Lóni had moved on to the next stage.

It was now an abstract war game—here in Disboard, this new world on a board.

No one really knew how the Great War had ended or by whom. And Think had no obligation to tell anyone. Why squander this advantage by leaving any written records? If anything, it was downright convenient that the laws of magic were kept under lock and key. Without magic, every single race was in chaos. But Think had already rewritten the laws of magic, *twice*. Just gotta do it one more time, and what’s a better time than right now—right here

6. Wagers sworn by the Covenants are absolutely binding.

Think smiled at Nina while she watched her slowly recall this new world's laws.

"Niina, what should I wager in exchange for your assistance in my little war gaaame?"

".....Elder...!"

Think was hiding something in that smile. Nina let out a small gasp.

She was grateful beyond words. Think may have lost the War—but she was going to win the next...and she needed Nina's help to do it. So Think was asking what Nina wanted in exchange.

Does she mean...anything?

After a brief moment of consideration, Nina gave her answer:

"In...in that case— W-w-will you...marry me?!?!"

.....,

.....Heh... Eh-heh... Hee-hee-hee. Niina... Oh, you...

Think was moved. She was waiting for something along the lines of having to be Nina's slave, or perhaps some revenge for all those times she'd violated her with interdimensional tentacles.

"...Why, I never pegged you as a liberal girl, Niina. I guess we'll have to make same-sex marriage one of the tenets of post-War Elven Gaaard."

"Oh, um—! U-um... Okay, so...I—I—"

Think had always known of Nina's feelings for her. She never really...*understood* what it meant to love someone, though, let alone... marriage?

Marriage: two partners united, swearing to stay by each other's sides until death do them part. Thinking about it logically, they were basically doing that already.

"Ah, w-well, that's perfectly fiine! I never cared for such stupid, antiquated conventions anyway, and, if I were to get married to youuu—why, I'm a genius, so I kind of saw this comiing! I already created a spell that lets two women procreate, and, uh—oh, wait. I need to rewrite that one in accordance with the new laws of magiic. Just gimme about fifteen miiinutes. ♥"

Think wasn't as cool, calm, and collected as she usually was. She began recompiling the rite as she rambled on. Think didn't know why her face had gotten all warm or why she couldn't meet Nina's gaze. No, the real reason she'd suddenly become such a shrinking violet was...well, you know...

But never mind that. Nina steeled her every last nerve to make what might have been the most important announcement of her life:

“Uh...E-Elder—I’m actually a...guy...”

“S-so...about this time limit you mentioned...” Nina began. “What else did you have in mind for a...new country...?”

Had Nina realized setting up the terms was a part of the game that was this new world? He asked his question with an earnest expression, to which Think replied:

“We’ll need at least two cities and their respective administrations, plus an agent plenipotentiary. 🎵 And for a time limit, let’s saaay—”

Then, as if testing the waters, she mumbled:

“—two years...”

“T-t-two years?! Don’t be ridicu— Uhhh...I mean—!! For you, Elder, I’ll see to it that it’s—”

Nina’s reaction was proof he was the ultimate trump card, something he himself didn’t know. Think chuckled to herself as she finally dealt her beloved trump card.

“...maximum. ♥ You have one year and eleven months! Good luuuck! ♥”

“Wha—noooo?! That’s literally not possible!! Give me a break here!!”

Nina was up in arms about only a month’s difference, but Think ignored his quibbles. “Sooo, in two years, we’ll be husband and wife, or wife and wife. Here, raise your hand like thiiiis. 🎵”

With the same bashful smile, Think raised her hand—and Nina made his wager. He was touched, in a way. After all, Think had effectively accepted his marriage proposal, though there were some technicalities with the gender depending on who won. He’d either be her husband, or end up her wife. While the notion of the latter was still quite frightening...

...the winner of the game had already been decided.

Perhaps without ever realizing he was the one who held the bargaining chips when they decided the terms of their bet—Nina raised his quivering hand in agreement.

But that was how things worked. One can never truly know themselves. Just like how Think Nirvalen didn’t know herself.

Nina Clive was no different—he wasn’t capable of knowing himself at all. So all he could do was...know the person who knew him best. Trust them more than he trusted himself.

For Think...that meant the first person she’d ever shown a genuine smile.

“

went for Nina. Whatever Think believed possible must be possible. She'd make it possible—no matter what it took.

Conversely, once you chalk something up as impossible—it won't possible no matter which way you slice it...

The day Think met the ghost and believed she could do nothing to stop him—



THREEFOLD LEVITATION

Take any major incident, and you'll find that the cause is usually something trivial. This was another one of those cases—many such cases. It started with an exchange of words between everyone's favorite royal-siblings-who-refuse-to-work and the girl they were forcing all their work onto.

—Steph, you're such an idiot.

—I don't want to hear that from a deadbeat like you.

Et voilà! You have yourself a shitshow that will unfold over the next five days.

“In our world, there’s a famous psychologist named Paul Ekman.”

—began to explain this special skill off the top of his head in great detail, no tablet needed.

“According to him, everyone—regardless of how and where they were raised—exhibits brief, involuntary facial expressions that divulge their true emotions. These instances, which last less than 0.25 seconds, are called microexpressions.”

Sora chuckled to himself—he’d already mastered reading people’s faces by the time he could walk and talk. When he first learned about this hotshot scholar’s theory, he thought, *Who does this guy think he is?*

But Steph, who had no way of knowing what Sora was thinking, was taking note of everything he said. He shook his head and smiled.

“You also see this same thing in races other than the Immanity, for whatever reason. In my old world, people learned how to detect lies by studying other people’s microexpressions. As they say: ‘The eyes are the windows to the soul.’”

“W-wouldn’t that mean you’re basically reading their mind?!” Steph looked up from her notebook and shouted.

That would rival magic—or at least the Werebeasts’ enhanced senses. The techniques running rampant in the siblings’ previous world frightened her. Smirking, Sora shook his head and continued:

“They’re not quite that omnipotent... All you can pick up from a person’s facial expression is what they’re feeling...like, for example—”

He hit Steph with a question—a very sudden question.

“Steph, you like going commando, don’t you?”

“Wh-whaaaaat?! Not a chance in hell I do!”

She took a brief pause before denouncing his assertion at the top of her lungs. But Sora noticed something—

“Wait, what? ...Seriously?” Sora, surprised by the answer to his own question, continued with a series of *ums* and *uhs*. “You pick up on just their emotions... You have to see how they *react to certain questions*—”

Basically, Sora’s sudden question had been a test to see what kind of microexpressions Steph showed. But maybe it wasn’t a good idea to share his findings. He hesitated for a moment, but pressured by Steph’s inquisitive stare, scratched his head and went on.

“Your first microexpression showed embarrassment. On its own, that would mean you were embarrassed by the question, but when you shouted, instead of your eyebrows lowering and getting closer together—which would show anger—they went *up*.”

What this means, is...

“You were *shocked*—as in, *How did he know I—?*”

“Wrong, wrong, WRONG!!”

Steph, now flushing scarlet, rushed to deny Sora’s claim. Sora watched this reaction as well, let out an “Oof...,” and took a step back before continuing:

“This time, I saw joy and arousal...and not an inkling of anger... Man, Steph, you’re nasty...”

“.....So Steph’s, actually...a raging...masochist...?” Shiro wondered softly. She was reading a book and still had Steph’s panties on her head. Steph stopped herself from shrieking once again. She bit down on her lower lip—another telltale sign of embarrassment.

“S-so, basically, on the very off chance—the *impossibly* off chance—that what Sora says is true...”

She wasn’t going to admit he was right about her, but if what he said about microexpressions was true...

“...then by reading people’s faces, you can tell if someone is lying, the same way the Werebeasts can?!”

If that were the case, she definitely wanted to learn how to do it, too—unfortunately...

“Nah, not possible.”

Steph slumped over, her hopes dashed. Sora plopped Shiro back on his lap.

“Like I said, the only thing you can tell about someone from their microexpressions is how they *feel*. And microexpressions are involuntary and extremely brief. Sometimes the person making the expressions doesn’t even know why they’re doing it. So it’s important to *see what they do after the fact*—like with you just now.”

Steph furiously jotted down more notes and said:

“You were wrong about me, though. Definitely wrong about that! So you’re watching how I’m reacting now?”

She asked as if he hadn’t spent the last eight years of his life doing nothing but play games. Shiro wasn’t as adept as her older brother at reading people’s faces, but even she rolled her eyes at how readable Steph was, and whispered:

“...You freaked out...twice... That means, he...hit the nail on the...head...”

“Who cares about that?! Sora, tell me how it’s done!”

“Who cares about that?”—those were the magic words. Steph had ignored Shiro and pressed Sora further.

“Sure, I can show you, but you should know—it’s super hard to do.”

“Hit me with everything you’ve got!”

Steph was committed to jotting all this information down. Sora snickered, then began listing everything he knew while he played a

game with his younger sister seated on his lap.

“Let’s start with *joy*—if their smile lasts longer than four seconds, it’s fake.”

“Huh?”

“On the flip side, even if that smile lasts just an instant—if the outer corners of the eyes don’t lower, that smile ain’t real. You can tell it’s real if their cheeks and lower eyelids lift. But if they do this with only one of their eyes, it’s a sneer—a sign of contempt. You can’t tell who they’re sneering at just with microexpressions, though. The object of their loathing could even be themselves. So

Sora—who acted as if he actually *was* reading her mind. He was indeed reading her expressions this entire time, just like he said he could. With a sarcastic chortle, he went on:

“Just so ya know—these techniques will do jack shit against me.”

“U-ugggh...”

Steph fell silent after picking up that Sora had been reading her this entire time. He was the one who was telling her all this information in the first place. It was a bad idea to play against him at his own game when he had pretty much spent his entire life doing this. Steph sighed before she realized something.

“Also...” Sora’s expression grew dark, and with something of a self-deprecating tone—he gave Steph a warning. “...I wouldn’t try to pick this up if I were you. It’s not as nifty a trick as you’d think.”

“.....”

Shiro slumped over without a word—she knew exactly what her brother was getting at. It was possible to be able to read people *too much*.

“...Huh? Why is that...?” Steph asked.

Steph was the quintessential good girl. Meanwhile, the young man she was looking at had an air of self-loathing to him as he patted his sister on the head—a hint of jealousy could be heard in his quick laugh.

“...Nah, you’ve got nothing to worry about, Steph. So what do you want to play next?”

Sora’s smile was brazen; he and Steph played a series of games until the sun had risen, with Steph eventually reduced to covering her naked body with a single bedsheet...

Day Four—The Dead of Night, Yet Again

Usually, Steph would make her entrance by practically kicking down Sora and Shiro’s door, but today, she was much calmer and more collected. She knocked on the door, then entered the room slowly. It was as if she had already won the game they were about to play.

“It’s time to get my revenge. Are you ready, Sora?”

Sora and Shiro stared at Steph, who was being much more brazen than usual.

“I’m...probably the last person who should be asking this question, but...”

“...Steph...have you, been...sleeping...?”

“You two are *certainly* the last people I want to hear that from! Now get up!”

Sora and Shiro were used to staying up late at night. They were

pretty much nocturnal from the start. Steph, on the other hand, had spent the past few days completing her work as Elkia's chief minister, while her nights had been spent...playing games with Sora. The bags under her eyes had grown darker since the previous day, but in a way, her vitality was almost commendable.

Alas, her efforts would be all for naught. Why, you ask?

"Today's game is simple," she said.

Unbeknownst to Steph, Sora and Shiro had seen the game she was going to propose from a mile away.

"I've hidden a *certain something* somewhere in the castle. If you can find it, Sora, you win!"

Steph loudly proclaimed the rules of her challenge. Shiro moved to put an end to it the moment it started, but Sora shot her a look, which stopped her.

"Oh-ho—? A 'certain something,' you say...? Can we at least get a hint?" he asked.

"I left a note saying 'found it' on the thing I hid. That way, no one can cheat and claim otherwise! Heh-heh."

Steph was brimming with confidence. Sora lowered his head so that only Shiro—in her usual spot on his lap—could see his face. After all, anyone would be able to tell from his expression how much he was dying to say:

—Yeah, I already know exaaaactly what and where it is!!

But his nerves of steel helped him restrain himself—and he asked what he imagined would make the game much more interesting.

"...Do you care *how* I find the whatever I'm looking for?"

After many years of being together, it wasn't hard for Shiro figure out that her brother knew how Steph was going to respond.

"No, no! We can't have you bringing Izuna or Jibril to sniff out the item with their enhanced senses or magic. You need to do this game on your own!"

Just as he'd expected. The smile on Sora's face made that clearer than anything. He was leading her on.

"*On my own*, eh...? Also, I'm assuming I can't win by just *telling* you where it is, right?"

"That goes without saying! You can search anywhere you like, but I'll be watching you to make sure you don't get anyone's help!"

It goes without saying?

It certainly did. He'd be able to just say a handful of random places to fish out the answer; it also made sense that she would follow him around. It was so obvious, it was almost silly. Sora, a wicked smile on his face, gently lowered Shiro from his lap.

"Okay, I think I get it... Man, I really don't wanna do this..."

Shiro watched her brother poorly feign reluctance as he stood up,

and whispered:

“Brother...you’re...such an, asshole...”

“Shirooo! Don’t say something so cruel! Otherwise I’m gonna hang myself!” Sora screeched, on the verge of tears.

“...My bad... That was...way harsh...”

Shiro was genuinely sorry about what she had said, but knowing what her brother was about to do to Steph, she still meant it.

“Shiro! Steph is the one who decided on this game and its rules! My hands are tied! Or what, are you saying it’s okay for me to lose?! *Oomf—?!*”

Shiro was used to his antics after their eight straight years of gaming together.

“...Brother... No, funny business... Denied...”

That was all she needed to say to keep him from pulling anything sleazy. Sora visibly stiffened, his despair palpable. Even with the wind taken out of his sails somewhat, he managed to activate the pervy parts of his brain to come up with a new, although not quite as interesting, idea.

“Aw, fine... All right, Steph, gimme your hand.”

“Hmm? Huh? Pardon?”

Puzzled, Steph placed a hand on Sora’s outstretched palm.

“I’m gonna show you something fun. You ready?” He lightly gripped her hand and grinned from ear to ear.

“Steph—*tell me where the thing you hid is.*”

“...Wh-what?”

Why would I tell you? Steph almost said aloud, but Sora was ignoring her. He didn’t actually intend for her to tell him anything. Instead, he started moving her hand around gently. Up, down. Left, right. He appeared to be checking something—then, after throwing a few feints in there—

“Whoa?! ”

He led Steph’s hand under her skirt.

“While it’s painfully unfortunate that Shiro isn’t gonna let me fish it out of there myself...”

Sora heaved a deep, chagrined sigh. But he knew he was right.

“Take out whatever it is you’re hiding *in your panties.*”

“

sentence. “How—?! How did you know where I hid it?!”

She even wondered if he’d used some kind of magic.

“Steph, what would you do if someone asked you to show them your underwear drawer?”

“I—I would say no... Isn’t it obvi—? Oh...”

Steph picked up on something, just like Sora knew she would. Steph was by no means an idiot. On the contrary, she was quite smart. *That* was what made her so easy to read. A real doofus is unpredictable; you can’t rely on them to make logical decisions.

“Yup. When I brought your hand somewhere you *didn’t want me to put it*, I felt some resistance. No matter how much you try—actually, the more you try to stay away from the spot you don’t want me to find, the stronger you resist. Basically, if I ask you to show me where the secret spot is, it’ll be wherever your hand shows resistance. It’s a cheap kind of psychology trick.”

Steph’s eyes went wide, but Shiro interjected:

“...He’s, lying...” She stared at her brother; she knew he wasn’t telling the whole truth. Why, you ask? “...He knew what the game was...and where the card was, the entire time...”

“Wh-what?!” Steph shouted. She couldn’t believe her ears.

Sora simply nodded. “Yeah... You normally come bursting into our room, but today, you just sauntered in... It was pretty obvious you were *trying hard not to drop something*.”

Steph opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Sora ignored her and sat back in his usual spot, which was in his chair with Shiro on his knee. He went on:

“Plus, it was only yesterday I told you about microexpressions. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know you’d try to figure out a work-around. You looked so confident—you weren’t even hiding your facial expression. That means you knew you wouldn’t give any signals *no matter where I searched*.”

It’s a simple enough explanation. Sora would’ve picked up on any work-around Steph came up with, and that would’ve led her to lose by default. If she was so confident that her expression wouldn’t give away what trick she was using, then she just *didn’t have to use a trick*. What’s the point of a trick if you aren’t going to use it?

“The trick was the treasure in your treasure hunting game—as long as the note was on your person, you wouldn’t make any microexpressions no matter where I looked.”

Had Steph hidden the note somewhere in the castle, she knew her facial expression would give its location away if Sora got close. This was even more evident since she’d just learned about microexpressions yesterday. She needed to stay with him to make sure

he didn't cheat, and she had to maintain the same facial expression no matter where he searched. There wasn't a better spot than on her own person—furthermore...

“Steph, I genuinely think you really outdid yourself this time. You had the note on you, but you didn't stop there! You knew a virgin like me wouldn't just straight up violate you, especially with Shiro present... So you chose a spot that was hard for me to search! Man, you were *this* close...but—”

Sora was truly impressed, but

“...Steph...now you’re just...*too* self-aware...”

“Izuna...could you tell me whether what I’m about to say to you is the truth?”

Izuna must have picked up on Steph’s condition from her expressionless eyes.

“...Stuch, you seem really outta it, please. Just say the word and I’ll do what I can for ya, please.”

Izuna was ready to help Steph with whatever she needed. She was so hyper-focused on listening to Steph’s next words—just short of activating her bloodbreak ability.

Steph straightened herself up and finally spoke:

“

disappearing into one of its many corridors...

Day Five—Late That Night

“HYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

As always, the gamer siblings gamed into the deepest depths of the night—so late that even nocturnal animals would be concerned. Someone had kicked down their door with a mighty shriek.

We'll start doing our fair share of the workload, so please get some—”

“I’M CHALLENGING YOU TO OOONE LAAAST GAAAAAAME

I feel like flying—flying my foot into your face, that is! Heh-heh! If you'd like my autograph, you should ask for it while you still can!"

They could tell that Steph (what was left of her) was losing more and more of her marbles by the minute. Sora secretly face-palmed and thought:

She's so close.

Steph was *on the right track*. The *perfect* track. This tinge of crazy was exactly what she needed to get on his level, but...

It was all for naught if it led to a mental breakdown.

"...Fine. Challenge accepted. I'll take responsibility for pushing you over the edge."

Sora got up, but not before Shiro pulled him aside for a moment. "...Brother... Steph is, way stronger...than usual... *Eight times*, stronger... So, eight normal Steps..."

"I have no idea how you got those numbers, but one thing's for sure—this is gonna be tough..."

Sora knew it was what needed to be done. He turned and faced the hentai. He didn't have his usual air of boundless confidence about him this time—instead, it was the same intensity he would show whenever he went up against Shiro. You could tell from this aura he was giving off that he was going to play her with everything he had.

"Steph. Steeeeph—can you hear me...?"

"Oh-ho-ho? Are you looking for an autograph? Or perhaps a game? Or maaaybe you're after something a little more intimate—"

"A game. No objections to the wagers. So...what game do you want to play?"

“...Welcome...back...Steph...”

Steph woke up to Sora and Shiro staring at her. She looked around and realized she was on the bed—er, futon—in their room.

“S-Sora? Shiro? Huh...? Why am I sleeping here...?”

mode) had been during her game with Sora. At this point, Shiro wanted nothing more than for her to sleep. Sora, meanwhile, looked away and began scratching his cheek.

“I, uh...guess it was wrong for us to push all the work onto you. But, to be honest...Steph, you’re the only one who can do this kind of work—who can run a country full of different races. I originally thought that between me, Shiro, Jibril, Gramps, Izuna, and the Shrine Maiden, we’d be able to finish up about a week’s worth of work for you...but three days was the max we could do. So, uh...”

Steph could tell from the siblings’ tired faces that they’d been working nonstop the entire day she was asleep.

“





ONE PAIR OR HEART STRAIGHT FLUSH

“...Wow... This is so pretty...”

A black-haired girl stood on a shore on the outskirts of Clive, one of the fifty-two states of Elven Gard. Void of any emotion, she stared at a small seashell that rested in her palm.

The girl was Chlammy Zell, eighteen years old. She worked for the house of Nirvalen, a prestigious Elf family—more precisely, she was their slave.

That day, she was sent on an errand to pick up a parcel from a merchant associate of the Nirvalen family in the neighboring port town. On her way home, she caught sight of something glimmering along the shore. Chlammy went over and picked up what turned out to be a shell about the size of her palm. She patted the sand off it and held it up to the sun—beads of light bounced off its surface in all colors of the rainbow.

Without really thinking about it, Chlammy held the seashell close to her heart and looked around. The Ten Covenants forbade any and all forms of theft. In other words, even something as seemingly insignificant as a pebble on the side of the road could be the object of theft should it have an owner. She kept the shell close and backed away slowly.

Nothing happened. The Covenants didn't intervene. That meant this shell didn't belong to anyone—at least, that's what it should've meant...

“This'd be mine if I were anyone else...”

Slaves had one additional requirement in order for them to *own* something.

Chlammy chuckled in self-pity, still clutching the shell when she left the shore.

Chlammy bowed before an Elf woman with long, cream-colored hair—her master, Fiel Nirvalen, surrounded by several ladies-in-waiting. Fiel looked at Chlammy with her usual sunny smile.

“How many times must I tell you? I don’t want to hear about every little piece of trash you pick uuup.”

Fiel eyed Chlammy as if she herself were trash, then departed the room with her legion of ladies-in-waiting close behind.

That was Chlammy’s signal to keep the shell for herself—that one additional requirement.

Such was the reality of being a slave in Elven Gard. Slaves didn’t have the right to own anything—in fact, they didn’t have rights at all. They were the property of the family who owned them, and everything they owned belonged to their masters. These terms were bound by their covenant, making them absolute.

There was one little difference between Chlammy and the other slaves, though.

Her master shot her a brief look as she left the room. Chlammy knew what the look meant:



Later that night, Fiel visited Chlammy's room tucked away in a corner of the Nirvalen estate.

“Chlaaammyyy! ♥ I thought you might be feeling down about earlier, so your beloved Fi came to sleep with you—”

“Ah, w-wait, Fi, let me just—”

Chlammy quickly wiped her eyes and acted as if everything was all right. Fiel surveyed the sparse, bare-bones room. There were no decorations or items of note; just two sets of clothes: dirty slave garments and one presentable outfit for when Chlammy left the manor. The pile of hay on the floor was where Chlammy slept, though it looked more like a bird's nest than an actual bed. It didn't take Fiel long before she realized something was missing.

“

They should be grateful, Fiel thought, half-serious.

“That’ll only come back to bite you, Fi! I don’t want that to happen to you!” Chlammy insisted. All of Fiel’s ladies-in-waiting were from respectable families, albeit none as prestigious as the Nirvalens. Fiel wouldn’t be able to fire them for merely pestering a slave without any blowback.

“Listen, Fi. I’m begging you... I’m fine being a slave as long as I have you by my side, but—”

Chlammy’s eyes were filled with tears.

“—I don’t want anything to happen to you, especially if I’m at fault—that would be the worst, so please—”

“Chlammy...”

“You don’t have to worry about me—I’m used to it. In this country, Immanity are worth less than—”

Fiel wrapped Chlammy in a firm embrace, effectively silencing her. She smiled and petted her friend’s hair to console her. But inside Fiel was a rage that was about to boil over like magma in a volcano on the brink of eruption. She stared off into the distance, still grinning, and a bleak thought surfaced in her mind:

And the Agent Plenipotentiary Advisory Council was even more influential than the Senate. The agent plenipotentiary, from Fiel's perspective, was a piece of work. He was regarded by the Elven public as the strongest of all agents plenipotentiary, and this popularity was what allowed him to push back against the Senate. His term, however, would be coming to an end in a little over three years. It wasn't hard to picture what the Senate and the legislative assembly would do once the Agent Plenipotentiary Advisory Council was no longer in the picture.

The country was a cesspit, rotten from the inside out. Fiel believed it needed to be destroyed. But if that wasn't in the cards

but Chlammy cut her off. “Don’t say something like that... My answer would be the same even if I wasn’t bound by this covenant.”

There was only one thing in the world important to Chlammy.

“I’m happy *as long as we’re together*. But I need *you* to be happy, too. *You’re* the only thing that matters to me in this world.”

“Chlammy—we’re going to take over Elkia, the last surviving Immanity nation.”



Fiel went on to explain her plan.

She was currently an acting member of the Upper House, a position she would maintain only until the next election. Although Fiel’s peers scorned her as incompetent, the Nirvalen name remained one of the most highly revered in all of Elven Gard. She was going to use her position and heritage to coerce the other Upper House members into allowing her to infiltrate Elkia and claim the Immanity race for the Elves.

Elkia was in the middle of a big shift in power. The crown was up for grabs after its last king recently passed away, and his dying wish was for the next ruler to be decided via a gambling tournament. This was the perfect chance for the Elves to set up a puppet ruler. Fiel would have her slave, Chlammy, infiltrate the tournament as an Elf spy and win.

The first question the other Upper House members would hit her with was—why? After all, neither the Immanity nor their small chunk of land were of any worth to the Elves. Nevertheless, Fiel had full confidence that her proposal would go through. She had the perfect reason:

Elkia was the key to beating the Eastern Union.

The Eastern Union had defeated Elven Gard four times in the past. They were a rising superpower and the only country the Elves couldn’t figure out how to defeat. This was due to the nature of the Eastern Union’s game—opponents must forget all memories of the game once it was over.

Having a puppet monarch controlling Elkia would give Elven Gard a way to challenge the Eastern Union as the late king of Elkia had. But they wouldn’t pit just any old Immanity against the Eastern Union—they would be using an Elf’s Immanity slave.

That slave’s rights belonged to Fiel, thus acting as a potential work-around for the memory loss that followed playing against the Eastern Union.

That being said, this was hardly a foolproof plan. Especially since it didn’t include a strategy for *how* they would discover the contents of the Eastern Union’s game—but this lack of coherency was *key*.

A plan that sounded nice but was full of oversights—exactly the kind an incompetent Elf like Fiel would think up.

That was precisely what the Elf legislation needed to believe for

them to let her go through with the plan—they would pass it *in hopes* that it would miserably fail and thereby cause the Nirvalen family to lose its last semblance of prestige.

On the off chance that the plan succeeded, it would make the Upper House members who passed it look good before the Senate. Should it fail, well, it would be a good opportunity for them to get rid of the pesky Nirvalens once and for all. Either way, the Upper House only stood to gain something. They would never realize the true nature of this plan, though

There was an array of finer details that needed to be addressed when creating the ideal slave. These extensive intricacies were compiled into a massive tome which the master then had to read from before challenging and defeating their slave in a game by the Covenants. It was like anything else in Elven Gard: a ruthless system thought out to the very finest detail.

Fiel beamed. “Why, we don’t need a shitty contract. 🎵”

“What...?”

Chlammy’s eyes widened as Fiel continued. “I, Fiel Nirvalen, challenge Chlammy Zell to a gaaame. Should I lose, I pledge to spend the rest of my life together with her, until death do us paaart. 🎵”

“W-wait, Fi! That’s not slavery! It sounds more like m-m-marriage!!”

“Oh? Why, are they not essentially one and the same? You say potato, I say potaaato.”

“That’s not how it works at all! They’re two *very* different things!!”

That’s not even a legitimate pledge. There’s nothing binding about it!

Chlammy tried to convince Fiel of as much, but she responded with the same smile.

“We want to be bound niiice and tight by a covenant no one can take from us. What difference does it make if we’re slave and master, friend and friend, or wife and wiiife? ♥”

“

“Why are you still in your social outfit? Hurry up and get into your filthy rags, *slave*.”

As always, Fiel’s ladies-in-waiting met Chlammy with harassment. A few months ago, Chlammy would’ve tensed up if they even looked her way, but she wasn’t the same Chlammy anymore. She had Sora’s memories now—the man who’d outmaneuvered Fiel to the fullest extent. These Elves before her...they had this stupid look to their faces. It was almost cute. She could hardly believe she used to find these women scary.

“

“She spoke out of line during a legislative meeting. It was quite deplorable,” another added.

she strutted away, leaving the group of Elves in her dust.



from Chlammy in a game, but that would mean they indirectly stole the money from Fiel Nirvalen. None of the women would ever do such a thing, lest they end up losing their jobs like Chlammy said they would. But the fact of the matter was that there were coins in each of their pockets. They all wracked their brains until Chlammy's words came to mind:

Lord Noel's butler, everything that goes on in this house!"

Yes, yes, that's it! Why, there's more than enough blame to go around! Look at them go! It's pandemonium! The sunniest of smiles appeared on Fiel's face as the women continued bickering.

"I see what's going on here. Why, it looks like everyone in the Nirvalens' employ is utter gaaarbage. ♪"

Now Fiel had a legitimate reason to fire the lot of them. They'd stolen from their employer, and that would be on their records, too.

It doesn't matter how much the other noble houses detest Fi. Who would even consider hiring someone with a reputation as a thief?

Chlammy had a slight grin. She met eyes with a smiling Fiel, who led the ladies-in-waiting to another room.

"I'll listen to each of your excuses, one by ooone. ♪"

Chlammy watched Fiel leave with the women, and a phrase popped up in her mind. It was one she'd never heard before—meaning it was from Sora's memories.

"All difficult things are made of simple things. Even the smallest ant hole can breach the largest dam."

(I'm guessing this describes how all big incidents start with small things. That a stone wall can collapse because of an ant hole in the wrong place.)

But apparently, that wasn't how Sora interpreted it. Chlammy couldn't help but chuckle to herself when she recalled his own personal take.

"'Everything's simple. You can destroy an entire kingdom with a tiny hole.' ...That's so like Sora."

And it was just like how Chlammy used four coins to bring down a group of Elves. She smiled as she twiddled the fifth coin in her fingers.



Chlammy sat in the Nirvalen manor's front garden, sipping a cup of tea at a wooden table. Those ladies-in-waiting had picked on her for her entire life. She watched as each of them, one by one, left the estate with a suitcase full of their belongings.

"...I guess this is...a sort of revenge," Chlammy muttered, but strangely enough, she didn't feel anything deep down. She struggled to believe that Elves this pitiful once made her tremble with fear. This didn't feel like an accomplishment; it simply felt ridiculous. Chlammy got up to leave when she caught sight of the leader—or rather, ex-

leader.
“

Just let the fools play a game among themselves, and watch them destroy one another. Sounds like a good idea, right?

“

Chlammy clutched her head as she called out for her friend, who must have teleported using magic. Then she had a thought:

alone in this mansion. You should wear the appropriate attire.”

“Stop calling it our *first night*, will



“Chlammy... I want you to forgive me.”
“

but Chlammy continued with the same awkward smile on her face.

“Sounds crazy, right? But that guy really believes in his heart of hearts that ruling a country is a huge pain in the ass... And, get this, his reason for challenging me to a game in the first place:

“I don’t like the way you think.”

“.....”

“The plans I told him about were your plans, not mine.”

She recalled that day with a touch of self-loathing.

“He knew that the fate of an entire race couldn’t be left in the hands of a person with a slave mentality—someone like me, who believed Immanity couldn’t win against Elf. You know, Sora actually liked your plan. If I’d been the one to come up with it...then he would’ve let me win. At the end of the day, those two—they’re gamers, not politicians.”

That was why they needed Stephanie Dola to run Elkia for them. They knew that being good at games didn’t make them good leaders.

“But I’m—different now.”

Chlammy looked up at the ceiling. Her eyes weren’t empty like they once had been—like how Fiel knew them. They were full of *purpose*, gazing far off into the distance—they saw something.

“I promise I’ll rely on you more and stop shouldering everything on my own all because I don’t want to cause you trouble. So, Fi—there’s just one thing I want to ask you.”

I won’t run away anymore, no matter what—so please...

“Fi...could you help me?”

“Why, you don’t have to ask me twiiice. We’ll be together forever.”

together as slave and master, and how vague it was. What did Fiel actually mean by “partner”? How much of that covenant was genuine on her part? Fiel’s eyes were full of concern as she watched Chlammy ponder over this question.

“Chlammy... Does it bother you that...we’re different races?”

“N-no, not at all! You’ve always been the one person I can truly trust; that hasn’t chang—”

Fiel’s expression brightened the moment she heard this. “Why, in that case, I suppose it really doesn’t matter that we’re both womeeen.

♥”

“Wait, what?! That’s—so sudden! And an entirely different topic!”

“I love you, Chlammy... How do you feel about meee...?”

Chlammy noticed Fiel looked terribly uneasy asking the question, and took a moment to think about her answer. “Love” in Elven was a little different from “love” in the Immanity tongue. The former was a more general term used to describe affection between family and friends, for example. For humans, however, telling someone “I love you” meant something a little more...*serious*. But right now, Fiel and Chlammy were speaking in the Immanity tongue. And in that case, the meaning Fiel was referring to was

“...Why...I’m not sure about that myseelf.” Fiel suddenly began mumbling, which caused Chlammy to tense up. “It’s not like I’m your parent... And I know it’s rather strange for an Elf like meee to get so attached to an Immanity like youuu...”

Fiel looked like she was still a teenager, but she had been alive for over half a century.

Even she herself didn’t know the answer to Chlammy’s question.

“I see something in you I don’t see in myself or other Elves. That’s the truth. But...I simply don’t know how to describe the feeelings I have for you.”

Fiel looked down. This was the first time she’d ever been this open. She shared how she truly felt, despite her own bewilderment.

“I feel we are more than just *close friends*. But we aren’t family, and you definitely aren’t my slave.”

“.....Fi.....”

Fiel looked up at Chlammy.

“Sooo I was wondering whether *kissing you* would bother me at all. ♥”

“

have a special relationship of their own, but it doesn't really apply to us.

...Maybe I should follow Fi's lead. I wonder if I could kiss her

accepted her feelings—would that answer her questions?

.....

“Erm...mmm! I’d better nottt. 🎵”

She wanted their first kiss to be a shared experience. Then Fiel giggled as she decided—

“Why, if we can beat Mr. Sora and his sister to the title of the One True God, Chlammy’s life span and race won’t matter anymooore.”

—she was going to help Sora with his plan.

However, she and Chlammy would be the ones to defeat Tet. A slight grin appeared on her face. Sora—no, both he and his sister—were only interested in playing games. And not against just anyone. They wanted to play against a strong opponent; someone stronger than them. They were gamers to the core—and mere children.

Fiel knew that Chlammy had likely picked up on a certain important detail from Sora’s memories. Although he fully intended on fighting together with Fiel and Chlammy, there was one reason why he didn’t bind them by the Covenants.

“You want a rematch—don’t youuu, Mr. Sora? ...Why, consider this challenge accepted. 🎵 We’ll beat you and your sister, juuust the way you want us to...♥”

Fiel had a sinister smile on her face as she closed her eyes and fell asleep. She and Chlammy weren’t going to take their loss lying down.



HIGH CARD ALL RAISE (PART 1)

Legend has it that the two strongest beings met in the heavens, seeking to end the contradiction that was their dual existences. Their battle took place on what was once the world's highest mountain—Múspellskjálf. The mountain is now long gone, no longer lingering on the horizon. And yet, the fearsome battle that occurred atop its peak is still talked about to this very day.

The mightiest of the Old Dei—Artosh, god of war.

The strongest Dragonia—Hartileif the Final.

It was a time before the world as we know it existed. High above the summit overlooking the world below was the site of a heavenly duel from the distant past

“That would be impossible. In the same way one cannot know the unknown. As a filled glass can hold no more wine, endless victory naturally leads to questions left unanswered. 'Tis but an endless cycle.”

Silence fell—some would call it brief, others eternal. The two ultimate beings faced each other until time seemed to lose all meaning

luck.”

He slowly spread his gargantuan wings. From the mountain’s summit, they seemed to cover every speck of land.

“I see this discussion was meaningless, dragon. You will soon forfeit your title of mightiest being.”

“’Twas a fruitful discussion, god of war. You shall soon learn what it means to possess that title.”

“Hey, hey, hey, apparently those filthy moles built the strongest ship in the world! Who wants to go exterminate them and their ship with me? 🎵”

A race that needs no introduction—the Flügel.

It doesn't make this world any easier to accept. The Flügel themselves *could not care less* about all of this.

Their nightmarish paradise in the sky echoed with one woman's cheerfully dopey shout:

"Nyaaah!! Hey, everyboody! The girls and I are back! We've made our triumphant return!!"

The Flügel paused their brutal conversations and turned their heads to see the sky warping—a byproduct of Flügel shifting. The resulting high-pitched sound signaled their sisters had returned from the earth below victorious.

"Oh! Sister Azril, welcome hooome. ♥"

Another Flügel greeted the arrival with a smile, and many more shifting sounds followed. About one hundred more Flügel appeared, all covered in blood. The youngest of them, also known as the Irregular Number, was among them.

"Jibril! Welcome back!"

"Hey, hey! How many of the Elves do you think you offed this time?!"

The Irregular Number—Jibril—had remarkably long, prismatic hair and amber-colored eyes with cross-shaped pupils. Of all the blood-drenched Flügel who had returned from battle, she had the most commanding presence.

"I did not count how many rarity level two kills I claimed. I merely slaughtered everything in sight—including a Phantasma. ♥"

She licked the blood off her cheek and gave a smile that even a god would die for.

The crowd of Flügel cheered when they heard of Jibril's quarry. They wanted to know everything—how many lives their sisters took, what kind of hellscape they produced on the surface below. The sisters got closer, excited to hear all the bloody details, but Azril hushed them. "Nyaaah! Hold it, everyone! We'll tell you what happened later, after we tell Lord Artosh!"

The crowd reluctantly opened up a path, and the rest of the Flügel who had returned from battle followed Azril, the First Number, through.

"You sure are popular, Jibril."

The Flügel next to Jibril sounded pleased. She was missing one of her eyes and wings, and her halo was broken to the point where it was barely visible. Her name was Rafil.

Long ago, the Flügel had once managed to defeat an Old Deus in

battle. The battle took place before Jibril had been created, so she had only heard rumors about what happened. Rafil had led their army and succeeded in piercing the Old Deus and destroying its ether. The injuries she sustained were so severe that not even Artosh could heal them.

“No, I’m nothing compared to you, Elder Rafil...”

air.
“

kind enough to *point out for us*. ♥”

Azril and Rafil were quite formal with their reports, but Jibril was different. She was smiley and more expressive. Mind you, this was in front of their creator. She didn’t even try to hide her smug joy.

The incomplete Elven rite had caused the Phantasma to go on a rampage. Jibril had deduced that the target of the failed rite was whatever the rite used to control the Phantasma—its core. And her deduction was correct; hence her satisfied grin. Going against a Phantasma usually ended with casualties climbing up into the triple digits

curtsy before standing up straight.

As soon as she did, the air around her began to warp. A vast number of spirits surged around Avant Heim, causing him to rumble with surprise.

And then

precautions. It was just a part of being a Flügel at that point, like a family tradition. In the same way Artosh always enabled Jibril's behavior with a smile, Azril always questioned why Jibril would do such a thing.

"Hmm, how should I put this...? Ah yes, let me think about it—"

And, as always, Jibril took a moment to think about her answer without any clue as to what she did wrong.

"I know my attacks won't hurt him, but seeing them have so little an effect only makes me want to at least budge him off his throne all that much more—ah, Azril! Here's an idea should you like to be useful for once! How about you *and the rest of the girls* all fire off your own Heavenly Smites, or maybe—? ♪"

"No maybes! How am I supposed to react when I hear you talk about harming our creator with a smile on your face?!"

"I think your usual dopey-looking expression should work just fine. ♪ What do you think?"

Jibril's comment was a dagger to her elder's heart. Azril fell to her knees; her eyes had glossed over. "Ugh, feels like my heart's gonna give out. What are you going to do if Lord Artosh gets mad and attacks you back?"

Jibril would probably—no, definitely—get reduced to ash, if anything remained at all. Jibril herself knew this as well—but, still in her child form, she looked at Azril with the same baffled expression she always had when she spoke with her.

"Hmm? Personally, I believe that challenging Lord Artosh is precisely what he wants me to do."

"Whaaat

“.....”

“I know you could destroy me if you really wanted to. Especially now that I’m in this form.”

She gazed down at her arms, which she could barely move after using up so much of her power, and laughed at herself. If that was the trust their creator put in Azril, then so be it

“Gnyaaa?!”

Rafil pried Azril off Jibril, sending the elder Flügel slamming into a wall, and picked up the younger Flügel.

“Jibril, it’s all well and good to exercise your free will, but at least consider the consequences first. I’m taking you to the Chamber of Restoration.”

Rafil scolded her like she would an actual child before walking away with Jibril in her arms. This was met with two similarly childlike responses.

“E-Elder Rafil! You needn’t worry about me! Another five years in that chamber and I might die from boredom!”



“Nyaaaah! Raf kidnapped my child! Somebody stop herrr!”

The smaller Flügel child flailed her limbs (wings included) in Rafil’s arms. The bigger Flügel child peeled herself out of the broken wall and dragged herself across the floor in tears. Rafil eyed the two of them wearily.

“

the Chamber as well. Apparently, she was under the impression that she would be able to stay in the same room as me... My poor elder really is such a dunce. The rooms in the Chamber of Restoration are all private, and since she is so much stronger than me, her recovery will take much longer. Every time I heard her wailing coming from her room, I was reminded of how stupid she is.



The earth was stricken with hellfire and death, spiraling through space toward its demise. A single shadow floated leisurely in midair and said to herself:

“Such lovely weather today. ♥”

Jibril cheerfully took in the sky above, which was obscured by a thick red mist. In each of her hands, she had—well...it was kind of difficult make out *what* exactly, but they appeared to be four heads.

Guardians—a rare Demonica kill—so Jibril decided to bring them back with her despite her disappointment.

“That was my first battle in five years, so I was in tip-top shape... I was hoping it’d be a bit more of a challenge,” Jibril said with a pout.

She had teleported to the Devil’s territory and destroyed everything she saw. It just so happened that the so-called Four Guardians were caught in the destruction as well. It certainly didn’t feel like a battle. She barely batted an eye. With a few waves of her hand, the entire territory was cleaned out. Hardly a fight; at best, it was

“A Follower of Reginleif the Enlightened?! Now that’s the kind of head I want to take home! ♥”

Jibril sped up; she wanted that Dragonia’s head for herself. Four Guardians, who? They were *just a nice warm-up for her!* She tossed aside their dangling heads, and they plummeted toward the ground.

stainless as a glistening glacier in the northern seas. Most stunning of all was his sagely gaze, as if he wasn't looking in the same timeline—as if he was gazing upon an unknown something far in the distance. This was certainly none other than a Dragonia, the most perfect living thing in this world.

There was a dignity to the creature that was strikingly godly, more so than any of the Old Dei (with the exception of Artosh). The white dragon looked at Jibril and began to speak.

“FOOLISH, FRAIL-FEATHER, FOLLOWER OF THE EMPTY GOD, I’LL FORGIVE THEE BUT ONCE. —*BEGONE*.”

Jibril couldn't understand what he was saying, but upon hearing his draconic utterance, she and the world around her—everything in the Dragonia's line of sight—were blasted into pieces and blown away.

instead...*curious*.

“Surely you do not seek to challenge me on your lonesome. What is thy bidding, frail-feather?”

Jibril tilted her head back toward the heavens, and with an even more twisted grin than before, she replied:

“It seems unlikely that I’ll be able to communicate with a lizard such as yourself. That question is ridiculous, past the point of absurdity. But, since you went out of your way to ask, I’ll go out of my way to answer—*of course I do.*”

All the while, Jibril withstood the hurricane-force gales generated by the dragon’s wings.

“However...,” she continued, “I’m not particularly interested in whether I can.”

had just finished speaking, the phrase that leveled the area around them.

“Our meeting was not fortuitous. We have misjudged each other.”

She couldn’t stop the destruction. Her consciousness began to fade, and all she could hear was the dragon’s voice.

“Try again some other day, feather. Once we come to understand each other, challenge me as often as thou like. Do not fail me now.”

He left her with a friendly warning. Jibril was absorbed into a vortex of destruction at the cellular level. Barely able to maintain her form, the last thing she remembered seeing was the dragon flying away.

Jibril...a Flügel...a god-killing weapon...was powerless to stop something far more powerful than herself. She lost consciousness.



Eva: 卍卍卍<卍卍 Year: 卐卐卐卐 Day: 卐卐卐

I was quite upset after I lost to that Dragonia. I spent another seven boring years in the Chamber of Restoration, but at least it gave me that much time away from Azril. That part was rather nice.

idea why they were reprimanding her.

“Well, I knew it wouldn’t be easy—”

Jibril had fought Dragonias on multiple occasions, but only ever with a group of fellow Flügel. They had defeated more than just a few—Jibril should have been fully aware of the difficulty involved.

Dwarves claimed that a single scale of a Dragonia was more formidable than one thousand warriors. Its flesh and bones were so tough that it normally required fifty to one hundred Flügel to put up a fight. There wasn’t a substance on the planet harder than its hide, and thus, even its remains lasted for an eternity. The Dragonias were indeed strong, possibly even rivaling a lesser Old Deus.

Jibril didn’t believe for an instant that she could easily defeat such a creature. She would’ve been satisfied if her strongest Heavenly Smite managed to peel off a scale or two.

She knew this, and yet, something bothered her.

“Fifty to a hundred Flügel can eke out a victory, but I could barely do anything alone... Hmm?”

She was powerless against the dragon, and the nature of her defeat wasn’t that simple. Not only did she fail to land a single strike on him, she wasn’t even sure if he had actually attacked her. The tiniest of birds are at least capable of holding their own against a falcon. Jibril didn’t care that this encounter almost cost her life.

She tilted her head in thought and muttered, “I’m not satisfied with how it went.” Rafil sighed.

“I might as well destroy that Dragonia! What do you think, Azril?”

Still flailing beneath Rafil’s feet, Azril shouted, “I think you’re insane! You almost died, ya know?!”

“If you say *no*, Azril, then that means the right answer must be *yes*. I’m heading out to search for the dragon. Thank you. Elder Rafil, I’ll be right—”

“Jibril.”

Rafil stopped her from teleporting away.

“...Answer me seriously. It was a coincidence that we even managed to save you.”

Rafil fixed Jibril with a piercing glare.

“You just spent *seven years* in the Chamber of Restoration. You should be thankful you have a stalker. Had Azril not been following you, it would’ve been too late to save you... I should add that our Flügel leader planted herself in front of the Chamber for all seven years, crying nonstop. It was really annoying, honestly.”

“Nyaaah! You don’t have to tell her that! You’re making me sound like an overprotective idiot of a sister!”

“Azril, you’re not right in the head. What are you if you’re not an overprotective idiot of a sister?” Rafil retorted. She was basically asking Jibril to be thankful to the angel freaking out beneath her feet. Jibril clearly felt that was unreasonable, but Rafil continued.

“I’m going to ask you one more time: *What were you thinking challenging a Dragonia to a battle?*”

Jibril knew that her much-respected elder might look down on her depending on how she answered. And yet...she still genuinely had no idea what she was being criticized for.

“My apologies, Elder Rafil, but please allow me to ask you a different question.”

Therefore, Jibril was going to respond with a question of her own:

“What makes you believe I can’t defeat a Dragonia by myself?”

Azril (who was still under Rafil’s feet) was the one to answer her. “That’s just the way the world works! Do you need someone to knock some sense into you after all this time?!”

Rafil gave a small nod to Azril’s statement. “Even a single scale of the weakest Dragonia harbors at least the maximum amount of spirits a Flügel is capable of using. That means just two of a Dragonia’s scales are as powerful as your average Heavenly Smite, Jibril. Multiply that by the tens of millions of scales on a Dragonia hide... You’d need to be infinitely stronger to even hope to penetrate their defenses. I know you know this.”

Jibril did know this, and yet, she’d challenged the dragon fully aware of this fact. So why?

“That’s not possible.”

as a group.

However—Jibril had a theory based on that lack of knowledge.

“If Flügel can defeat Dragonias with numbers, then I should have been able to do at least *some* damage against a Dragonia on my own. But, as you already know, that was not the case. So I’m trying to figure out what happened

you treating me like this?!”

No one was sure if they should answer that question. Even Rafil looked away when she heard it. Everyone was silent—except for one smiling angel.

“If you must know, I could spend the entire night listing the reasons, but if I had to pick a single one—”

Jibril said plainly what everyone else wanted to but could not.

“—perhaps your lack of *charisma*. ♥”

intentions.”



Artosh's dignified gaze silently urged her to continue. Rafil responded by getting on one knee and asking:

“

and commanding the Flügel born after her. She was a tool for bringing her creator victory in battle, the cause for great destruction throughout the world. Even when faced with certain death, she would lead as many Flügel as required into war with a smile if it needed to be done to actualize her creator's will.

But then there was Artosh's special creation: the Irregular Number.

For reasons unknown to Rafil, Azril had changed ever since that day Jibril was created. Only Artosh knew what he wanted from Azril and Jibril, but it was evident that Azril had particularly exceptional feelings for Jibril. She was a special unit; they couldn't afford to lose her.

Rafil wondered if those feelings had developed into this strange obsession Azril had with Jibril. This obsession contradicted Azril's original purpose; it was likely the reason she struggled to communicate how she felt about the Irregular Number.

With a smile, Rafil offered Azril her hand, which she used to slowly prop herself up. Rafil looked at Azril and muttered:

"Jibril would freak out if she knew her dumb oldest sister was the reason I lost my wings."

A lack of charisma, she'd said... Indeed, anyone who didn't know how Azril *used to be* might think that about her.

every Flügel was constantly changing

Azril, with her hands covering her face to hide her tears, shifted elsewhere in space. Rafil couldn't help but laugh to herself.

We're just jokes—and if that pleases our Lord, then it is an honor. But in that case, I think I've figured out why our Lord saves his smiles for Jibril.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't jealous... But this is what Lord Artosh desires. It's Jibril's special privilege."

She knew Jibril would fulfill their creator's wishes. In other words



HIGH CARD ALL RAISE (PART 2)

Legend has it that the two strongest beings met on this very land seeking to end the contradiction that was their dual existences.

meet.”

—she readied the mass of steel into a fighting stance. With her halo now spinning, she prepared herself for an all-out battle. Her opponent, the dragon, squinted his azure eyes and spread his expansive wings so they almost covered the sky. He asked her:

“Little Feather, dost thou know who fought at this very location a long time ago?”

“Of course I do—why do you ask?”

Jibril spoke without the slightest hint of enthusiasm.

A battle between the Flügel creator and the most powerful Dragonia took place over one hundred thousand years ago at this very spot. She’d never given this legend much consideration.

“Ours was a fruitful discussion. Prepare to be torn asunder once again, Little Feather.”

“It was a rather meaningless discussion. Are you fine with those being your last words?”

The rumbling, thunder-stricken channel saw a sixth battle between the dragon and the angel most unlike the legendary duel of long ago. The past five battles had ended in the angel’s defeat—all the more reason why this battle needed to be their last.

With utmost confidence, Jibril took up her pen. She turned a page in the journal she had started at some point along this journey. It was particularly full of entries following her fifth and most recent defeat. She recalled the three secret strategies she’d use to eke out victory on this day.

Jibril ran her pen across what was to be the final page in her diary

Without picking up on the intense expression on Rafil's face, Jibril cheerfully continued, "What's strange is, there was no effect—I mean, I was able to pierce through a few scales...but they grew back almost instantly. It's as if...time itself was reversed."

“Ah, no, this time I Heavenly Smited an Elf. Don’t mind me.”

“Oh really? All’s well that ends well, then. ♥ As if! Since when did using a Heavenly Smite cut open a hole in your belly?! Even in your child form, an Elf shouldn’t be too much work for you! So what *actually* happened?!” Azril demanded that mini Jibril—who sported *a gaping hole in her abdomen*—answer her.

“Ah, one of them attacked me while I was looking for their library. A multi-layered rite—it was quite the experience. ♪”

Azril was beginning to develop a headache; talking to Jibril was getting her nowhere.

never really above it.

I was just about to do something drastic when I came upon a particularly interesting note. The logic involved is far beyond my own powers of comprehension, so I don't quite understand all the details—but it sounds like the author tried to create their own closed temporal space only for the experimental container to fail. Then they proceeded to toot their own horn despite their failure: “Why, I really must be a genius to have survived that.”

Whatever the case—it looks like I may need to revise my opinion of the Elves. There certainly are some traces of genius living among those plant people.

Era: 𐌲𐌿𐌲𐌰𐌸𐌰 < 𐌲𐌿𐌲𐌰 Year: 𐌲𐌿𐌲𐌰 𐌲𐌿𐌲𐌰 Day: 𐌲𐌿𐌲𐌰

Having expanded my perspective and learned that there are in fact benefits to speaking with grass, I find myself with one day left in the Chamber of Restoration. What I'd like to do most is head straight for that Dragonia for another rematch, but this time, I'm going to make some preparations. I'll need three things... I'm fairly sure this will be our last encounter, but I don't want to take any chances. ♥

Rafil needed to say it, though. She was about to do so when

die.

Azril continued to look at Jibril, and she came to the same conclusion she had before.

the smallest trifles, and fill their days with warfare... It was the picture of peace. Yes, *peace*

recent creation. Not only that, the Irregular Number was made with a special purpose.

But Azril knew that Jibril's power was *not great enough*. She had less than a quarter of Azril's strength—and Azril was the strongest Flügel in existence.

Moreover, Jibril was imitating Azril.

Smite, instead of focusing it into a *single ray of light*, it worked better to just create an explosion.

But that made it impossible to aim, since this strategy dispersed energy in all directions.

The girls were confused for a moment, as Rafil had answered their question with another question, but she went on: “It’s a phrase that lesser beings like Elves and Dwarves tend to throw around. They call all their attacks the ultimate magic, the ultimate weapon—evidently, they think our Heavenly Smite is our ultimate attack. However—”

She paused, then snickered as she pointed up toward the sky.

“—an ultimate attack needs to obliterate its opponent, or else there’s nothing ultimate about it. *Take, for instance—what’s above us.*”

The black orb, a space cut off from the rest of the world, was only a few meters wide. Azril had fired off her Heavenly Smite within that space—and she was now reduced to her child form after using all her power. But the dark orb continued to rupture violently as Azril watched it with that same doll-like smile on her face.

The crowd could do nothing but cry out in horror. It was just as she said before the fight started, that it would end in *one attack*.

Think of it as a tiny threat. Rafil chuckled to herself as she shared this with her sisters, but it did little to calm their nerves. They all knew this was just as Rafil described; it was Azril's ultimate attack. Their lives would end the moment she used it on any of them. It didn't matter if they knew about it beforehand—there was no way for any of them to defend against it. Azril having access to such an irrationally powerful attack meant one thing for her sisters:

fallen off—then everyone heard a familiar voice that made them go weak.

“Yes... That’s it... That dopey face of yours...suits you so well, Azril...”

“Wh...what happened



“Nyah! So Jibs beat me?! How’d that even happen?!”

Azril then looked over at Jibril and gasped. Jibril was also in her child form. She was completely devoid of spirits, much less than when she usually reverted to her child form. She was swaying back and forth; parts of her body were missing. It didn’t look like she would be able to maintain her child form for much longer.

already.

“She may have found a way to beat someone stronger than her.”

Rafil still didn’t have any idea what it cost Jibril to pull off such a feat, or how she did it in the first place.

I’ll need to ask her when she gets out of the Chamber—oh, almost forgot.

“By the way, Azril. I’m gonna give her the Dragonia bone like I promised. You don’t mind, right?” Rafil asked her older sister, just to make sure.

“Uggghhh... Waaah... Jibs... Urrrgh...” Azril blubbered as she was forcibly taken into custody.

Rafil took her response as a yes

was the edict of a ruler. Should a Dragonia command people to destroy themselves, then those far and wide shall obey the command, without any way to resist. Jibril knew this more than anyone, as she had firsthand experience with how almighty they were. All matter the dragon saw was turned into a white light. It was absurd and unreasonable, but it was how the world worked for them. Jibril had been sucked into this unreasonable cycle.

(

happen now. They would use more energy than it took to use a Heavenly Smite and start losing their physical body.

contradiction possible. It was the source of the confidence Jibril had that neither Rafil nor Azril understood.



Wings of a tiny angel clashed with wings of a giant dragon.

As if they were recreating the legend from so long ago, their clash went beyond the sea where they battled and shook time itself. The dragon used its tail, claws, fangs, and words to fight against the Flügel. The angel responded by evading, blocking, and parrying his onslaught of attacks.

The battle tore through space and twisted through time, sending the world into a screaming frenzy. It was a phenomenon that far surpassed human knowledge, to the point where it couldn't be called a battle. Those who could distinguish between this clash and the one between the unrivaled god of war and the supreme Ruler of Dragonia knew that only gods themselves were capable of such destruction.

The sea beneath the two foes boiled over, and the mountains came crashing down with the sky.

All light disappeared in a single flash, without leaving a trace. The sight was apocalyptic, as if heaven and earth were collapsing—you had to wonder how someone capable of comprehending such destruction would describe it.

The dragon continued his onslaught of fatal attacks without signs of stopping, but not a single one reached the angel. Some might call it a miracle that she was able to keep up, but the dragon and the angel both knew more than anyone:

She was barely putting any effort into it at all.

The gap in power was still evident, but the little angel gracefully weaved her way through her opponent's attacks, using his power against him. Every time the dragon slipped through space and time, the angel demi-shifted through each wave, just barely escaping death. It was almost ironic; the incredible power of the dragon was what protected the angel.

something called a climax?”

She snapped back with some sarcasm of her own, but she definitely wasn't in as good a spot as she wanted to be in.

she couldn't possibly comprehend it.

That wasn't just for the Flügel; the same went for all living beings that inhabited the present. And yet, it was during this almost legendary fight when she reached a conclusion unbefitting of this frenzied world

No matter what time even meant for a battle like this, Jibril's next three attacks all happened at nearly the same moment.

Nonetheless, she fully realized that her chances of winning within this compressed version of time were slim. It was a hopeless wager, like putting all your money on a pig winning a horse race.

However—it was all or nothing. The fact that there was even a chance was more than enough of a reason for her to place her bet!

“Now

vanquished in the past, and for all Dragonias to come. All of their victories to this point were due to one thing: that a Dragonia's body accumulates too much power and *destroys itself from the inside*...!

If a Dragonia's body is capable of infinitely reverberating its own power between the past and future and into the present...what happens when there is a chink in their impossibly tough armor—their isolated husk of space-time?

A small hole—a wound—is all it would take, and any attack that penetrates that tiny spot would also *reverberate infinitely*. That explained why it took one hundred Flügel to defeat a single dragon. The problem was finding a way to penetrate their armor; after that, they needed only to add but a drop of energy for the dragon to implode.

This brings us to the second reason the dragon was in a state of shock. Not only did his reaction affirm the theory spelled out above—he was also reacting to something else. Upon firing off her second Heavenly Smite, Jibril was reduced to her child form. What could she possibly do for a third attack?

Smite—and an end to our battle.”

voice; he seemed very far away.

“...It seems I lost my gamble at the very end... What a pitiful finish...”

common sense?!" they screamed.

Nonetheless, relatively speaking, the Flügel really did have a certain amount of common sense when it came to war.

"Verily. Thou speakest the truth."

The dragon beamed.

moving forward...

P.S. I have the most annoying older sister in the world.

...Jibril was flipping through the journal she'd sworn to never open again when she noticed the aforementioned annoying older sister.

"Azril, would you please let go of me?" she asked, her voice cold as ice.

"That's gonna be a no."

room was a crowd of Flügel, and each of them agreed with Jibril's sentiment.

tone:

“

end twelve years later. But the god of war, even with his divine knowledge, had no way of knowing this.

Artosh quietly sneered as he imagined the battles that awaited one of his Wings.



AFTERWORD

“War. War never changes.” A quote from the opening of *Fallout*.

be different,” or “It’ll work out next time!” Driven by a bold vision and wishful thinking, humans repeat the same mistakes we have for centuries...

And so, dear readers...I ask you not to give up on humanity. Those who carved out their place in history merely believed “This time, things are gonna be different” or “It’ll work out next time

“(*deadpan*) I noticed you submitted **180** pages for the first draft.”

line of promo, so I'm thinking you guys could cut me a little slack!
Anyway, that's enough for this afterword! See you next time!

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